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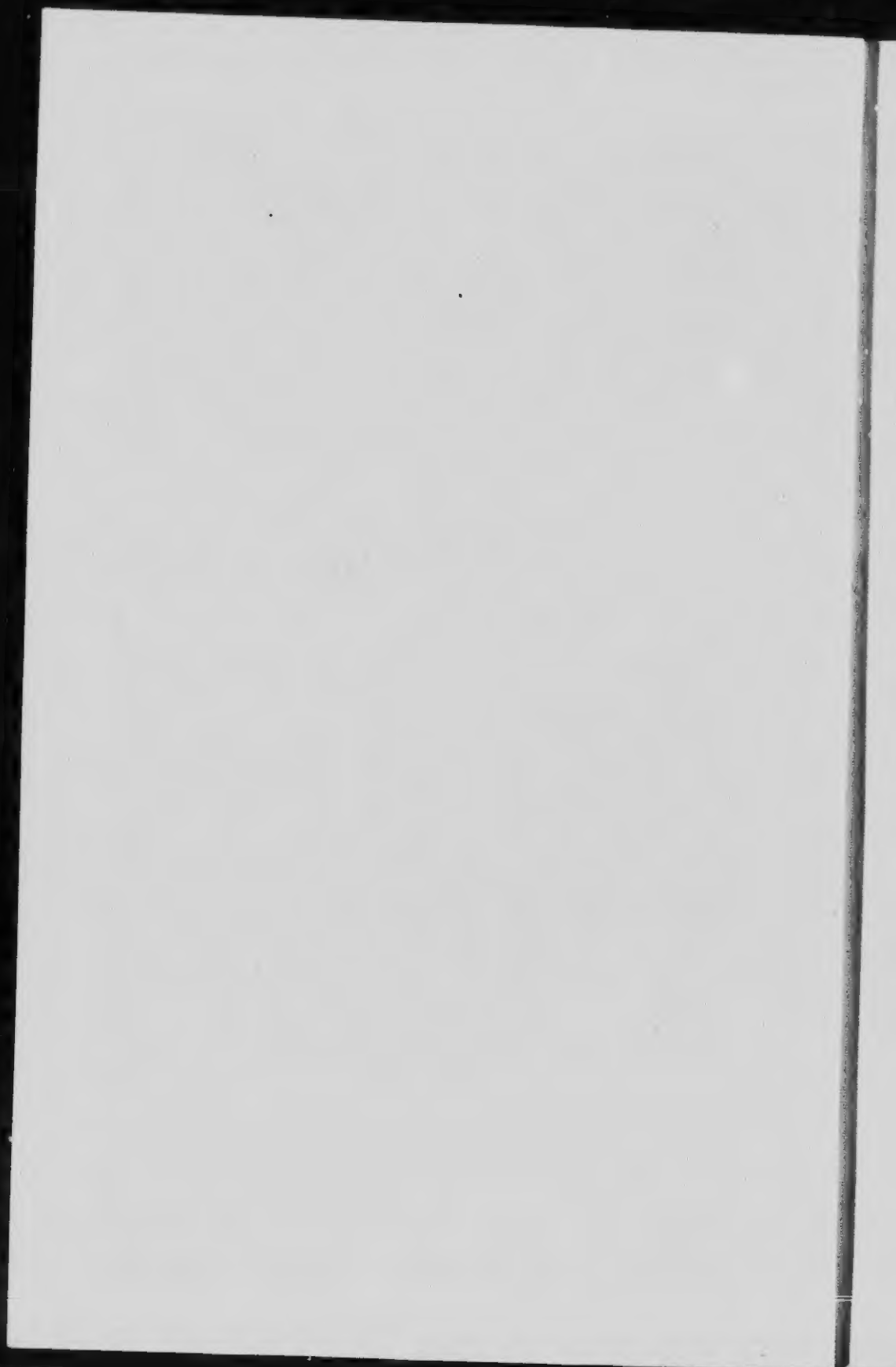
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1st Gun Edition





"What do our pattern young men say?" sneered Leicester.

THE MAN WHO ROSE AGAIN

BY
JOSEPH HOCKING

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR

TORONTO
THE COPP, CLARK COMPANY, LIMITED

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CHAPTER I

A CYNIC'S CHALLENGE

FOUR men sat in the smoking-room of a London club. They were alone. That is scarcely to be wondered at, for it was far past midnight. Moreover, it was not a large club, and even when the place was most frequented large numbers were seldom present. Three of the men were chatting cursorily about a defeat of the Government which had taken place that night, but the fourth, by far the most striking looking man of the quartette, sat almost by himself, moody and silent.

They were all young men. The oldest had barely reached his thirty-fifth year, while the youngest was evidently less than thirty. All of them gave evidence of being young men of leisure, and each of them could claim to belong to that class which is vaguely termed English gentlemen.

"Will the Government resign, think you?" said one.

"No," another replied.

"Why? It could hardly be called a snatch division."

"No, but governments do not resign unless the country is against them."

"Which it is."

"In a sense, yes; but in another sense, no. The question to-night was a brewer's question. Well, if they resigned and went to the country, they would be returned again. The brewers, for whom the Government has been fighting, would be sufficiently strong at the polls to secure the return of their supporters."

"Which is a strong reason why the Government will resign."

They went on discussing the question, neither saying anything worthy of record. They seemed to be deeply interested, however; perhaps because two of them were Parliamentary candidates. The man who sat apart, however, took no note of the conversation. He could by listening carefully have heard all that was said, but his mind seemed elsewhere. Neither did he speak to the others, although he knew each one intimately. Of what he was thinking it would be difficult to tell. There was a strange, vacant look in his eyes, and his face was very pale.

He seemed utterly oblivious of the time, and although a waiter hovered near, as if to remind the party that he was very sleepy, this young man especially took no note of his presence.

Presently he aroused himself, and rang a bell which stood on the table at his elbow.

The waiter came towards him sleepily.

"Whisky," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"A large one."

"Yes, sir."

"And make haste about it."

The waiter left the room, while the others glanced at each other significantly.

"How many is that to-night?" said one in a low voice.

"Heaven knows, I don't. He's on the drink again."

"If I'd taken half he's had, I should have to be carried to bed."

"Pity, isn't it? He's ruining his career."

"I don't know. He never shows he's been drinking. He's always at his best when he's drunk."

"He's never drunk."

"Well, you know what I mean. He can never do himself justice now, unless he's had what would make any one of us incapable."

"Yes, but that kind of thing can't last. No constitution could stand it. In time it'll destroy his nerves and then——"

"Yes, it's a pity."

The waiter brought the young man a large measure of whisky and a bottle of soda-water. He poured a small quantity of soda into the whisky. His hand was steady and he did not seem to be in the least affected by what he had drunk.

He lifted the glass to his lips and nearly drained it. Then he sat back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"I should think he will soon be asleep, now," whispered one.

"Not he."

"It's an awful pity. Don't you think one ought to try and warn him?"

"Try it. I would not like to."

"But he's ruining his life. A fellow of such brilliance, too. Do you remember that speech he made at the Eclectic?"

"Remember! Who doesn't? You know the con-

stituency he's candidate for? Well, the story of his adoption for that constituency by the general committee is worth telling. I don't quite know how it was, but through a misunderstanding two men were invited on the same night to come and address them with a view to adoption. Well, the other man was young Lord Telsize, an able, capable fellow, by no means a bad speaker, and as rich as a money-lending Jew. Each had to address the meeting in turn, and Telsize came first. He made a rattling speech; he voiced all their pet opinions, and every one was made to understand that if he were adopted it would not cost them a penny to fight the election. The meeting wanted to vote straight away and adopt Telsize without hearing Leicester, especially when they heard that he would contribute practically nothing to the funds. However, the chairman overruled this. He said it would not be courteous to ask a man down and not hear him speak; so they called him in. Leicester saw at a glance how things stood, and that put him on his mettle. In three minutes the meeting was at a white heat, and before half an hour was over he was unanimously invited to fight their battles. A man who was there told me that Leicester's speech was the most remarkable thing he'd ever heard."

"I don't care, he's ruining himself. The truth about him is sure to come out, and then he'll be drummed out of the place."

"I suppose Miss Blackstone refused him because she had heard about this habit of his."

"Oh, it wasn't that only. Miss Blackstone is a very religious young lady, and, as you know, Leicester is an agnostic. Not only that, but his views about

marriage would not be likely to commend themselves to her. Fancy Radford Leicester being accepted by a girl like Miss Blackstone!

They had been speaking in low tones, although they thought the young man was too much under the influence of whisky to take any notice of them, even although the sound of their voices could reach him plainly. They were greatly surprised, therefore, when he to whom they had referred as Radford Leicester rose from his chair and came close to them. He looked at them quietly, glancing first at one and then at the other. Each returned his glance, as if wondering what he would say.

"I was in doubts," he said, "as to whether I was in one of Moody and Sankey's meetings or whether some strange fate had thrown me into the midst of a Dorcas society."

"Why, old man?"

"Because at first I heard of some scheme for snatching a brand from the burning, and afterwards I heard some gossip which was as full of lies as the gossip of a Dorcas society usually is. When I opened my eyes I was a bit surprised. I found I was in the smoking-room of my club, where women are not admitted. Am I mistaken? For the plan for my salvation was essentially feminine, while the gossip was scarcely up to the level of a woman's charity meeting."

He drew a chair into the circle and sat down, each man looking rather uncomfortable as he did so.

"Don't you feel like a word of prayer?" he said mockingly. "I am rather in the humour for it. What is the process? First conviction, and then conversion, isn't it?"

There was no thickness in his voice, each word was carefully articulated. He gave no sign of drinking, if we except the peculiar look in his eyes.

"Your father is a parson, isn't he, Purvis?" he went on. "He will be pleased to know that his son is walking in his father's footsteps, while Sprague's mother is great at women's meetings. Sprague has evidently inherited his mother's gifts."

Sprague turned towards him angrily.

"Steady, steady, old man," said Leicester, with a mocking smile on his lips. "You can't deny that you assist your mother at her drawing-room meetings, neither can you deny that the story of Miss Blackstone's refusal of me was born in one of them."

"It might have been mentioned there," said Sprague, thrown off his guard.

"It originated there," said Leicester lightly.

"Why do you say that?" asked Sprague.

"Because it is safe to assume that, when a story without any foundation in fact is afloat, especially if it is a trifle malicious, it was born in a religious meeting run by women. Besides, I know your mother started this gossip."

Each of the three men looked more uncomfortable. They had no idea that the quick ears of the man had heard every word.

"I'm a sad case," went on Leicester, mockingly. "I'm ruining my career, my nerves are breaking down, and I shall soon be drummed out of my constituency. Let's see, how many whiskies have I had to-night? Surely, surely, you fellows, who are so immaculate, should have a few words of prayer. Come now,

Purvis, a few words of exhortation. I will listen patiently."

"We said nothing wrong, Leicester," said Purvis, "and we meant nothing wrong. We only said what those who know you best, and like you best, are thinking. You may keep the fact of your hard drinking from the public a little longer, but not much. Such things are bound to leak out."

"Especially when I have such loyal friends."

"That isn't fair, Leicester. Not one of us would ever dream of saying outside what we say among ourselves. We can't close our eyes or our ears. We've heard you order whisky after whisky to-night, and we've seen you drink them."

"And what then?"

"What then?"

"Yes, what then? I am as sober as you. I say, hold out your hands as I am holding out mine. Are yours steadier than mine? I tell you, no whisky that was ever distilled could bowl me over."

"All nonsense, Leicester; all nonsense. Whisky is whisky, and nerves are nerves, and whisky will beat you, if you go on drinking so. It may be unpleasant for you to hear us say so, but truth is truth."

"I know when to stop," said Leicester. "While my head and my heels are steady I know I'm all right."

"All the same, you can't stop people talking, and there is some truth in the Blackstone story."

"How much?"

"You know."

"Yes, I know," said Leicester quietly; "and as you chaps are so deeply interested in my soul, I'll tell you.

I never proposed to Miss Blackstone ; I never thought of proposing to her."

"Then why did you cease going to her father's house?"

Leicester laughed.

"Because her father has ceased to invite me," he replied. "Do you know why? I'll tell you. The devil got hold of me one night and I trod on the old man's moral and religious corns. I knocked the sawdust out of his dolls. I was feeling a bit cynical, and I attacked the motives and morals of religious people. Now, then, you know. But I never proposed to Miss Blackstone; if I had, I should have been accepted."

"It's good to have a high opinion of one's self."

"Or a poor opinion of women," replied Leicester.

"What has that to do with the question?"

"Only this. Women don't trouble about morals. What women want in a husband is a man that shall be talked about; a man who is courted and petted; a man who is quoted in the papers. Given position, and notoriety on the lines I have mentioned, and women don't trouble about the other things."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know."

"How do you know?"

"I am thirty years of age, and I have kept my eyes open during these last ten years—that's all. You talk about my religious views and my ideas on marriage, and what you call my cynicism generally. But let the best of the women believe that a man will give them the position they covet and then he can believe what he likes and do what he likes. No, my dear,

pious friends, you need not fear either about me or my future as long as you believe in your views about what is called my abilities."

"That's a libel on women," said Sprague.

"I'm willing to put my views to a test," replied Leicester.

"What do you mean?"

"My language is pretty plain," replied Leicester.

Each of the other men felt the influence of Leicester's stronger personality, and each of them resented it at the same time. They felt almost angry that the man whom they had been pitying as a drunkard should so coolly hold them at bay.

"It is a poor thing to say you'll put your views to the test, when you know it cannot be done," remarked Sprague.

"Look here, my dear, exemplary friends, who are so anxious for my moral reclamation," said Leicester in his quiet, mocking tone, "I've made a statement, and I'll stand by it. I'm not a marrying man, as you know; still I am willing to sacrifice my own feelings for the good of my fellows. So, then, pick out your most pious and high-principled young woman; Sunday-school teacher preferred, warranted to be sound in doctrine, and having a proper horror of men like myself. Choose her carefully, and I'm prepared to prove my words."

"If she'll have you."

"That's the point. I maintain that neither orthodoxy of life nor conduct weigh with women as long as the suitor has the qualifications I have mentioned. Now it is believed, rightly or wrongly, that I am going to have what is commonly called a brilliant

career. Well, choose your most pattern young woman—she must be what is called a lady, of course, and I must stipulate that she is passably good-looking and is not penniless."

"And then?"

"I am prepared to put my views to the test. Of course, model young men like you would not think of a wager; but if I don't succeed—well, I'll give a hundred pounds to any religious cause you like to mention."

The man's eyes flashed with a new light. The plan he had sketched seemed to amuse and excite him.

"It's all nonsense," said Sprague.

"Test it," laughed Leicester.

He had apparently imbued the others with his own spirit. For the moment they were eager to see what would happen.

"Name your woman," went on Leicester. "What, are you afraid? Will you not support your doctrine of the nobility of women? I give it as my opinion that women are uniformly selfish, vain, and sordid. I maintain that what they want is a man who will give them position, name, prominence. Given that, and everything goes by the board. And I stand by it. I place a hundred pounds upon it. All I ask you to do is to name your woman."

There was a wild gleam in his eye, and he was evidently prepared to stand by his words. As for the others, they yielded more and more to his stronger personality.

"No," said Sprague presently, "it is not fair. If either of us had a sister we would not like to make her the subject of such a proposition."

"But if you are right, my dear, good friends," went on Leicester, "no harm can be done. I propose to the lady, and I am refused. What then? It is only another illustration of the downfall of Radford Leicester, the atheist, the cynic, the drunkard. But I am willing to risk it. All I say is, name the woman. Let her be the best you can think of; let her be the most exemplary the most high-minded, the most orthodox, and I maintain that she'll not care a fig about all my failings, if she believes in the brilliance of my career."

"If you hadn't drunk so much whisky you'd not propose such a thing," said Purvis.

"Oh, you are backing out, are you?" sneered Leicester. "It is always the same. Fellows like you utter pious platitudes; you proclaim the glory of women; you hold up your hands with horror at a man who dares tell the truth, and then you back out like cowards. I say there is no woman but who has her price. You quote that lying gossip about Miss Blackstone refusing me because of my heresies and my 'whisky drinking. I tell you it is a lie invented by Sprague's mother, and I go further and I say that there is no woman who really cares a fig for these things, provided you can satisfy her ambition. And I'm prepared to stand by it. All I say is, name your woman."

"Miss Olive Castlemaine."

The man who had taken no part in the conversation spoke this time, and as the name escaped his lips both Purvis and Sprague gave a start. Even Leicester was silent for a moment. He looked from one to another suspiciously, then he burst out laughing.

"You've made a bold bid, Winfield," he said. "You make even me tremble. Miss Olive Castlemaine is, so I suppose, the most sought-after heiress in London. She fulfils all my conditions, and, more than that, she has refused both Sprague and Purvis. I suppose, from what I am told, that she looked upon Sprague as a bit of a hypocrite, and Purvis as—well, not likely to have a great future."

He evidently stung both these men by his words. It was perfectly true that both of them had been refused by Miss Olive Castlemaine, it was just as true that she had been sought after by a number of other eligible marriageable men, and had refused them all.

Miss Olive Castlemaine was known to be a young lady of more than ordinary beauty, of good social standing, and, what was more, an heiress to great wealth. But she was not a society woman. Some women laughed at her because she preferred seeking to do good in the world to living the life of a butterfly. She worked among the poor, she taught a class of ragged children, and she was known to have strong opinions both about men and things. She had taken a degree at St. Andrews University, she was a Girton girl, and had attained to a high position there. Without being a "blue stocking" she was a cultured woman, and was acquainted with the language and literature of more than one country. But, more than all, she had caused many society women to raise their eyebrows at the mention of her name, because she was, to use their expression, "pious." She belonged to no set, and was rarely seen at receptions. She loved London because it was the centre of English life—life intellectual, political, religious : but society functions had no

attractions for her. Some had called her a female prig, but few regarded her as such—she was too healthy-minded, too natural, too real.

Her mother had died when she was quite a child, and thus she became the one earthly delight and pride of her father who was managing director of, and chief shareholder in, one of the most prosperous and respectable firms in London. She lived with her father in one of those fine old houses, surrounded by a large tract of park-lands, a few of which yet remain within the precincts of Larger London, in spite of the ravages of the speculative builder.

She was at the time of the commencement of this history about twenty-three years of age. She was a perfectly womanly woman. She hated much of the foolish flippancy which characterised many of the women she knew, and had a healthy disgust for those who talked lightly about not being bound by those great social institutions which lie at the basis of our national greatness and purity. Nevertheless, she dared to think for herself, and had an almost masculine way of defending her opinions.

Being the only child of John Castlemaine, who occupied not only a high position in the City of London, but owned more than one fine estate in England, she had all that money could buy, while her father's integrity and honourable reputation made her the envy of those who, socially, would regard her as an inferior. For John Castlemaine, while bearing a name known in English history, and possessed of great wealth, was still a member of what is called the "middle classes." He simply stood high up in his own class. He was not of those who mingled

freely with the men who guide the destinies of the nation. Rich men came to his house, men great in the world of finance ; but men great in the world of politics and science and letters were unknown to him. Perhaps this was his own fault, or perhaps it was because his tastes were simple and because he did not possess the qualities which would attract men of influence and power to his house. For John Castlemaine was a plain man. He belonged to the merchant class, and he prided himself on the position he held.

As we have said, his daughter, Olive Castlemaine, had had many suitors for her hand, but she had refused them all. Among those who had been unfortunate were Harold Sprague and Herbert Purvis. They were both mediocre but respectable young men. Both had been in love with her, and both were wounded at her refusal. Perhaps this was why the mention of her name made them start as if with pain.

"Do you accept?" said Winfield.

"What do our pattern young men say?" sneered Leicester, and he looked from one to another as if awaiting their answer.

CHAPTER II

THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

FOR a minute there was a silence. In spite of the fact that Radford Leicester had instilled his own spirit into the party, there was something in his cynicism that repelled them as well as fascinated them. They were not bad young men. Not that they had high ideals, or were filled with lofty enthusiasms. But they had been reared on conventional lines, and although neither of them would have admitted it, they were influenced by the conventions which had surrounded their lives. To them there was something sordid, something repellent, in the thought of a man coolly offering to marry any one in order that he might prove the truth of a cynical statement to which he had given utterance. Nevertheless, they longed to accept his challenge. Radford Leicester's spirit possessed them; the man's cool and confident cynicism attracted them. The very daring of the proposal broke down their conventional ideas. Besides, in spite of Leicester's confidence, they did not believe that his opinions were true. Especially was this true of Purvis and Sprague. They had proposed to Miss Olive Castlemaine and had been refused. Other very eligible young men had also suffered the same fate. Was it

likely, then, that Leicester, whose reputation was so peculiar, would be more fortunate than they?

More than all this, both of them felt somewhat bitter towards the woman who had refused them, and although they would not confess it even to themselves, they would rejoice if she should suffer something of the humiliation which they had felt. Such a feeling is natural to weak men. The sting of disappointment made them eager to fasten on anything which promised them a kind of revenge. They had a feeling that Miss Castlemaine was proud of her conquests, and they would rejoice if her pride could be humbled.

"What do our pattern young men say?" repeated Leicester. He emptied his glass as he spoke, and then turned towards them. "Why, think, my dear Moody and Sankey," he went on. "You were longing to save me from the error of my ways a few minutes ago; now here is your chance. It is true I only know this young lady by sight, but I have heard of her religious proclivities. Why, she might convert me. She might snatch the brand from the burning. She is such a pattern young woman, so high-principled, so good. Besides, I am told that she belongs to the Nonconforming order of pious people. She is a Wesleyan, or an Independent, or a Presbyterian, I don't know which; but being one of them, her principles will be more pronounced than those who belong to the worldly State Church. Here is your opportunity, not only of proving your belief in the nobility of women, but of bringing me under religious influences."

He spoke quietly and composedly, yet no doubt he was influenced by the whisky he had been drinking.

"Besides," he continued, "here is your chance of

THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

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proving that the woman who refused you would also refuse me. Come, now, what do you say?"

"I accept," said Purvis.

"And you, too, Sprague?"

"Miss Castlemaine would not give you a second thought."

"Then you accept my offer? Look here, if I am rejected I give a hundred pounds to—what shall we say—Guy's Hospital? While if I am accepted you give the same sum. Is it a bargain?"

"I tell you she would not look at you. If she is not already acquainted with what those who know you think about you, she would soon become acquainted, and then—well, you would be driven from the house."

"Exactly; then you agree?"

"Oh yes, if you like."

"Good; as for Winfield, his only part in the business is naming the lady. Gentlemen, I am really much obliged to you. I have not felt so interested in life for a long time. You are really benefactors. But come, now, we must go into this affair in a business-like way, and, 'pon my word, I'll have another glass in order to drink success to the enterprise."

He rang the bell and the waiter appeared.

"Four whiskies, waiter," he said.

"I don't like this," said Sprague.

"What, the whisky? I'll complain to the management."

"No, the whole business. It isn't right."

"Not right? Why, it gives me a new interest in life, man. Already my moral sentiments are being elevated. I see myself going to that Nonconformist

church with a hymn-book and Bible under my arm. I even see myself a deacon, or an elder, or something of that sort. Not right, when it is having such a regenerating influence?"

"Stick to your guns, you chaps," remarked Winfield quietly, who had been the silent member of the party.

"But I must have fair play," said Leicester. "I want a fair field and no favour. All I demand is that you chaps shall hold your tongues. This conversation must not go beyond these walls. That's fair, isn't it?"

"That's nothing but just," said Winfield.

"But how are you to get an introduction?" said Sprague. "Old John Castlemaine is very particular as to whom he has at his house, and although I have consented to this business, I'll take no part in it."

"Nor I," said Purvis; "and now I come to think about it, I withdraw from it altogether."

"Except to pay your hundred pounds if I succeed," said Leicester.

"You can't back out from that," remarked Winfield.

"Still, I'll be a party to nothing," he said weakly.

"Of course I know it'll end in nothing. Miss Castlemaine is one of the cleverest women I know, and she'll see through everything at a glance."

"Then I'm to have fair play?"

"Oh yes, I shall not interfere with you. There will be no need."

"That is to say, not a whisper of this conversation goes outside this room."

"Of course that is but fair," urged Winfield again.

"Very well," said Purvis, "I shall say nothing; but mind you, I do not believe in the business. It's wrong,

it's not—well, it's not in good form. But there, it doesn't matter. It'll end in nothing."

"Exactly," said Leicester; but there was a strange light in his eyes. "And you, Sprague, you'll act straight, too?"

"Oh, certainly," said Sprague. "I shall say nothing; all the same, I don't like it. But Leicester 'll give up the whole idea to-morrow. He'd never have thought of it to-night if he hadn't been drunk."

"I drunk, my friends! I am as sober as the Nonconforming parson of the church that Miss Castlemaine attends. I'm as serious as a judge. No, no, I stand on principle—principle, my friends. I have a theory of life, and I stand by it, and I am ready to make sacrifices."

"But how are you to get an introduction?" asked Sprague. Evidently he was uneasy in his mind.

"Leave that to me; I ask you to do nothing but to hold your tongues, and that you've promised to do. I stand alone. I'm like your Martin Luther of old times. Against me are arrayed conventions and orthodoxy, pride and prejudice, thunders temporal and spiritual, but I fear them not. I—I, a poor solitary cynic, am stronger than you all, because I stand on the truth, and you stand on sentiment, convention, orthodoxy. Gentlemen, I drink to you in very mediocre club whisky; nay, I don't drink to you, I drink to the man who stands on the truth—truth, gentlemen, truth!"

Again he lifted a glass of whisky to his lips and set it down empty.

"I'm going to bed," said Sprague.

"And I," said Purvis.

"And I, gentlemen," said Leicester, "remain here. Like all men who undertake great enterprises, I must make my plans. As a champion of truth I must vindicate it. I live to rid the world of lies, of sham, of hypocrisy. Good-night, gentlemen, good-night."

The whisky was beginning to show its effects at last, although his voice was still clear, his hand still steady. An unhealthy flush had come to his cheeks; the strange look in his eyes had become more pronounced.

And yet had a stranger entered the room at that moment, that stranger would have been struck by his tall, stalwart figure and his striking face. For Radford Leicester was no ordinary-looking man. Compared with him the others were commonplace. Neither was his face a bad face. It suggested lack of faith and lack of hope, but it did not suggest evil. Moreover, the well-shaped head, the broad forehead, the finely formed features, suggested intellectuality and force of character. 't also told of a man whom nothing could daunt when his mind was made up. But it was not the face of a happy man. No man who is without faith and hope can be.

Radford Leicester had come into the world handicapped. His father was a hard drinker before him, and he had inherited the love for alcohol. But more, he had been educated in a bad school. His mother had died when he was a child, and thus he became entirely under his father's influence. His father was a clever man, but a man whom life had embittered. He had been embittered by the death of his wife; he had been embittered because he had never obtained the success he had coveted. He saw men who did not possess half the brains or half the scholarship which

he possessed, leap into fame, while he remained obscure. Perhaps this was because his theory of life was so utterly hopeless, and his faith in men and women was so little. Young Radford was naturally influenced by his father's views and his father's character, and thus by the time he was old enough to go to a public school he was, like Shelley, an atheist.

Presently his father, who was ambitious for his son's future, sent him to Oxford. He became a student at Magdalen College, where he obtained, not only a reputation as a scholar and a debater, but he became notorious pretty much on the same lines that Shelley became notorious. He became more and more imbued with the materialistic philosophy which was accepted by a certain section of the men there; indeed, he became their leader and spokesman. He professed an utter contempt for life. He regarded men and women as so many worthless things spawned upon the shores of time, to be presently swept away into nothingness. He had little or no faith in the nobility of human nature. Men were mostly sordid, selfish, and base. Trace men's motives to their source, and they were in the main selfish. Women were, if possible, worse than men. When he was about twenty-four he altered his opinion for a time. He fell in love with a girl who fascinated him by her wit, her beauty, and what he believed to be her goodness. For a time his love made him cast off his father's hopeless philosophy. He formed plans for the future. Through his mother he possessed an income which, while not large, placed him in a position of affluence. It was large enough to enable him to enter Parliament, where he believed he could make for himself a brilliant future.

He proposed to the girl whom he had become enamoured, and was accepted. He had barely become a happy accepted lover, however, when a young barrister who had won a great deal of praise at the Bar, and had also entered Parliament, where he was spoken of as a man with a great future, also proposed to her. Without hesitation this girl, Blanche Bridgetown by name, cast Leicester aside and accepted the man who had made a reputation, rather than keep her faith with one whose future was uncertain. In this decision Blanche Bridgetown was largely influenced by her mother.

Radford Leicester soon recovered from the wound he had received in his heart, but he did not recover from the blow which was struck at his faith. All his old cynicism and hopelessness reasserted themselves. Whenever he spoke of women he spoke bitterly, his outlook on life became less cheerful than ever.

Then another element entered his life. Up to this time he had not been a hard drinker; but now the taste which he had inherited grew stronger. Drink made him forget his wounded pride; and, confident in his boast that no distilled spirits could ever affect him outwardly, he indulged in this evil habit more and more freely.

Still, pride was not dead. Professing, as he did, that life was a miserable sort of affair at the best, he still had ambition. He wanted to carve out for himself a place of position and power. His party had found a constituency for him, and he had contested it. At the time of the contest, however, the political opinions which Radford had adopted were not popular. His opponent won the seat.

Again he was embittered, again his pride was wounded, and the habit which had been gaining in strength now seemed to have obtained a complete mastery over him. Thus Radford Leicester, who had never been known to be drunk, was a drunkard. He had no faith in man; he had no faith in God.

There was one power in his life, however—ambition. He wanted to be renowned. He knew that he possessed unusual abilities; his career in Oxford had proved it; his friends had admitted it a hundred times in a hundred ways. Moreover, the vice which had mastered him had not degraded him in the eyes of men. Only a very few knew that he was a hard drinker. He always dressed well, spoke clearly, and walked steadily. Of his cynicism he made no secret, of his repudiation of the Christian story and of Christian morals he almost boasted; nevertheless, nearly every one spoke of him as a man who would make a great name.

Besides, to weaker men he had a kind of fascination. He inspired others with his own recklessness, and many almost admired his scorn of conventional beliefs. In a way, moreover, he was liked. While repudiating accepted morality in theory, he was in many respects most punctilious about points of honour. When he gave his word he never broke it. In his political speeches he never pandered to popular cries. He did not say things because they were popular, and even while he declared that all men had their price, he was never known to sell himself.

At the present time many eyes were turned towards him. He had become a great favourite in his constituency. The leader of his party had come to speak

at a great gathering, and when, as the accepted candidate, he had also to address the meeting, the great man had been simply carried away by his speech. As he remarked afterwards to his colleagues, it was the speech of a statesman and an orator. It might have been Macaulay, or Burke, who had come to life again.

At times Leicester pretended to despise all this, but at heart he was proud of it. Indeed, as I have said before, ambition was the one thing which kept him from being a wastrel.

No doubt Radford Leicester's story has been repeated many times in many ways; nevertheless, it is necessary to tell it again, in order to understand something of the complex character whom I have introduced to my readers.

The club in which they had met was situated in the region of Pall Mall, and while not in the strict sense political, it was mostly frequented by those who were of Leicester's way of thinking. As I have said, it was not a large club; nevertheless, it provided a limited number of beds. These young men had come up to listen to a debate at the House of Commons, and preferred spending the night at the club to going to an hotel.

"Going to carry this thing through, Leicester?" said Winfield when the others had gone.

"If only to knock the nonsense out of those prigs," replied the other.

"Marriage is a dear price to pay."

"Then why are fellows so eager for it?"

"I don't know. Men are mostly fools, I suppose."

"Yes; but then it was not a question of marriage. It was only a question of being accepted as a possible husband."

THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

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"The same thing. No man of honour can win a woman's promise to be his wife and then jilt her."

"A great many do it. Besides, women don't care."

"Don't they? Why do you think so?"

"Because women are women. And it isn't as though this Miss Castlemaine had fears of being placed on the shelf."

"You are very cool about it, old man."

"Quite the reverse. I am quite excited. Just fancy my scheming to be the promised husband of a beautiful heiress, a sort of glorified Quakeress, rich, pious, and high-minded. Winning an election will be a small thing compared with winning her."

"But surely you'll not try and carry the thing through?"

"Why?"

"Because you don't love her."

Leicester gave a significant whistle.

"Love," he said: "does that come in?"

"It's supposed to."

"It's one of the many illusions which still exist among a certain number of people. As for its reality——"

He shrugged his shoulders significantly, and then became quiet.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Winfield presently.

"A man's secret thoughts are sacred," replied Leicester mockingly. "Do you think my pious sentiments are for public utterance?"

Winfield rose and held out his hand.

"Good-night Leicester," he said.

"What, going to bed?"

"Yes, it's past one o'clock."

"Well, what then? You've no wife to regulate your hours."

"No, but I have work to regulate them. A journalist is a slave to the public."

"Stay half an hour longer."

"What's the good?"

"I can't sleep, and it's horrible to go to bed and lie awake. Besides, I believe I've a touch of D. T."

"Nonsense. You who boast that your nerves are steel, and that no whisky can bowl you over."

"That's true, and yet—look here, Winfield, you are not one of these whining sentimentalists, and one can speak to you plainly. I was never drunk in my life; that is, I was never in a condition when I couldn't walk straight, and when I couldn't express my thoughts clearly. Nevertheless, it tells, my son, it tells. I don't get excited, and I don't get maudlin. Perhaps it would be better for me if I did."

"Why?"

"Then I should be afraid. As it is, I am afraid of nothing. And yet, I tell you, I have a bad time when I am alone in the dark. It's hell, man—it's hell!"

"Then give it up."

"I won't. Because it's all the heaven I have. Besides, I can do nothing without it. Without whisky my mind's a blank, my brains won't act. With it—that is, when I take the right quantity—nothing's impossible, man—nothing. Only——"

"What?"

"The right quantity increases—that's all. Good-night. When I come to remember, I shan't have the blues to-night."

"Why?"

"Why? Have I not to make my plans for conquest? I must win my wager!"

"Nonsense. You don't mean that?"

"But I do. Good-night, old man. Let me dream."

Radford Leicester remained only a few minutes after Winfield had left the room. Once he put his hand upon the bell, as if to ring for more whisky, but he checked himself.

"No," he said aloud, "I have had too much to-night already."

He walked with a steady step across the room, and the waiter, who had hovered around, prepared to turn out the lights.

"Good-night, Jenkins," said Leicester, as the man opened the door.

"Good-night, sir."

"Every one gone to bed except you?"

"Nearly every one, sir."

"Then I'll leave it to you to arrange for my bath in the morning. Half-past nine will do."

"Yes, sir. Hot or cold?"

A cold blast of air came along the passage. He was about to say "Cold," but he changed his mind.

"Hot, Jenkins," he said. "Good-night."

When he got to his bedroom and turned on the lights he looked at the mirror, long and steadily.

"Thirty," he said presently, "only thirty, and I'm ordering a hot bath at half-past nine in the morning. It's telling."

He wandered around the room aimlessly, but with a steady step.

"Yes," he said aloud presently, "I'll do it, if only

to have the laugh out of those puppies. What's the odds? Blanche Bridgewater or Olive Castlemaine? Women are all alike—mean, selfish, faithless. Well, what then? I'm in the mood for it."

He threw himself in a chair beside the bed and began to think.

"Yes," he said presently, "that plan will work."

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CHAPTER III

THE MAN AND THE WOMAN MEET

"**O**LIVE," said John Castlemaine, after reading the letters which had come to his house one morning, "I am expecting two men here to dinner to-night."

"All right, father," said the girl, who was intent on a letter of her own, "I'll tell Mrs. Bray."

John Castlemaine went to the sideboard and cut a slice of ham, and then returned to the table again. His daughter was still intent on her letter, although she occasionally took a sip of coffee.

"Letter interesting, Olive?"

"Very."

Mr. Castlemaine looked steadily at his daughter and sighed. He was not a sad-looking man, even although he sighed. There was a merry twinkle in his keen grey eyes and a smile played around his mouth. Perhaps he sighed because his daughter reminded him of her mother, who was dead. Perhaps he remembered the fact that she was his only child, and that if she married he would be all alone. That he was proud of her there could be no doubt. No one could see the look he gave her without being sure of it; that he loved her very dearly was just as certain.

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And indeed it was no wonder that this should be so, for Olive Castlemaine had for years been his only earthly joy and comfort. Especially was this so since she had left school. He had bestowed all his affection on her as a child, but when she returned home from Germany, after having received many honours both at St. Andrews and Girton, pride was added to his love.

When one goes amongst a large concourse of people there is generally one face, one personality that stands out clearly and distinctly from the rest. The great majority are commonplace, unnoteworthy; but there is generally one, if not more, who strikes the attention, and claims the interest of the observer. When you see such a one you begin to ask questions. You want to know his or her history, antecedents, or achievements. If you learn nothing of importance you are disappointed. You feel that you have been defrauded of something.

"With such a face, such a personality," you say, "he or she should do and be something out of the ordinary."

Olive Castlemaine was always the one in a crowd. People seldom passed her without wanting to have a second look. When she went into society, which was seldom, many questions were invariably asked about her. There might be more beautiful women present; there might be women who were noteworthy because of some book they had written or some picture they had painted, but they did not excite the interest which Olive Castlemaine excited. It was not because of any exceeding beauty of form or face. Not that nature had dealt niggardly towards her in this direction—quite the contrary; she had a finely formed face,

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and there were those who raved about the purity of her complexion and the glory of her "nut-brown hair." She was tall, and well formed too, and carried herself with grace. But it was not beauty of face and form that singled her out from the crowd. What it was I will not try and tell. I should only fail if I attempted. Beauty rightly understood is a spiritual thing, and is not dependent on contour of features or a brilliant complexion—it is in truth indefinable. A doll may be pretty, but it is not beautiful. Beauty is suggested rather than portrayed—it is something which lies behind the material. I have on rare occasions seen plain women who are beautiful. What has made them so I cannot tell, except that there has been what I call, for want of a better term, a spiritual essence, which has ennobled and glorified everything.

Looking at Olive Castlemaine's photograph, you would have said, "That is a fine, striking-looking girl." If you met her and talked with her, you would not use those words. Perhaps you would not try to describe her at all. You would be impressed by a sense of nobility, of spirituality, and you would be surprised if you heard of her doing anything mean and small. Indeed you would not believe it. Perhaps that was why strangers generally asked questions about her. For beauty which suggests truth, loveliness of mind, purity of soul, is of the rarest kind. And yet this beauty is possible to all.

"I say, Olive."

"Yes, father."

"Nearly finished?"

"Oh, please forgive me. I ought to be ashamed of myself, but it is an interesting letter."

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"Who is it from?"

"From Bridget Osborne. We were together in Germany, you know."

"Bridget Osborne? Where does she live?"

"In Devonshire—Taviton Grange. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yes," said John Castlemaine with a smile. Then he added, "What a coincidence!"

"What is a coincidence?"

"Oh, my letter is from a man in Taviton."

"What letter?"

"The letter which led me to tell you that two men are coming here to dinner to-night."

"Oh, I had almost forgotten. Yes, I must tell Mrs. Bray. Half-past seven, I suppose."

"Yes; by the way, what makes your letter so interesting?"

"Well, Bridget's letters are always interesting. As you know, she writes well, and she has quite a gift in summing up people. You remember her letter about that French Count?"

"Very well. Yes, yes, it was very clever. Has some one else of note been staying at the Grange?"

"In a way, yes. At least she thinks he will be of note. Indeed she describes a very striking man."

"Who is he?"

"He is the candidate which her father has persuaded to fight Sir Charles Trefry at the next election."

John Castlemaine opened his eyes rather widely for a moment, then a rather amused look came upon his face.

"Tell me what she thinks about him," he said quietly. Olive Castlemaine took up the letter she had placed

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on the table and began to search for the part which gave the description to which she had referred.

"There's a lot about the girls we met in Germany," went on Olive; "you'll not be interested in them. Oh, here it is. Listen: 'A very interesting guest has just left us. I am not sure whether I like him or no. Sometimes I think I do, and at others I am just as sure that I don't. He is the candidate who has been elected to fight Sir Charles Trefry, and father feels sure that he's bound to win. He came here to dinner last night, after which he addressed a meeting at the Taviton Public Hall, and then came back here again for the night. Of course father knows him very well, but, as I have always been away when he has been here before, this is the first time I have seen him. He arrived about six in the evening, and, owing to the meeting, we had to have an early dinner. The thing which was most remarkable about him before the meeting was his silence. He scarcely spoke a word. And yet I am sure that nothing escaped him. He has large grey eyes, which have a strange look in them. His face is very pale, and he looks all the more striking because he is cleanly shaven. As I said, he was very silent, and yet I felt interested in him. He impressed me as one of those strong, masterful men who compel people to do things against their wills. Of course father asked two or three people of local importance to meet him, and the quiet way in which he snubbed them without being rude—ay, and without their feeling that they were snubbed—amused me. I rarely go to these political meetings, but I was so interested that I wanted to hear him, and I went. Of course there was a great

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crowd, but I took very little notice of it ; I was too intent upon studying Mr. Radford Leicester's face. I have heard him spoken of as a keen politician, but I never saw a man look so utterly bored. Especially was this so at the beginning of the meeting ; a little later a smile of amused contempt came upon his face as he listened to eulogiums on "our historic party." When he got up to speak, he looked disgusted at the way the people cheered, and although the former part of his speech was clever, there was nothing striking about it. He did not seem to think the audience worth an effort. Presently, however, one of the cleverest men in the town—he belonged to the other side—got up and heckled him. Then the fun began. He seemed to realise that he was on his mettle, and the way he pulverised our "local clever man" will be the talk of the town for a week of Sundays. Never before did I realise the influence of a strong, clever man. He simply played with the audience and swayed the people at will.

"When we got home after the meeting he was again very silent for some time ; then the vicar of our parish called, and again the fun commenced. This time politics were mingled with religion, and although such discussions are generally very dull, I would not have missed it for anything. To see the Rev. William Dunstable writhe and wriggle and try to explain and qualify was simply splendid. I think I see his method. Mr. Dunstable would make one of his very orthodox assertions, with which Mr. Leicester would seem to agree. After this he would lead the vicar on by a series of the most innocent questions, but which presently led him to an awful pit from which he could

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not get out. What Mr. Leicester believes himself I have no idea, although I am told he has very queer opinions; but that he gave Mr. Dunstable a very bad time there can be no question. Indeed, he is one of the cleverest men I ever met.

"And yet I don't think I like him. He doesn't seem sincere, and you always have the feeling that he's mocking you. Besides, he seems to have no faith in anything. He coolly pours scorn upon our most cherished traditions, and yet you can't fasten upon a single saying which commits him. In a sense, he's a sort of modern Byron, and yet you can never associate him with Byron's vices.

"I am afraid you will be awfully bored at this long description of a man you have perhaps never seen nor heard of, but he's the talk of the town just now, and really he's a most fascinating man. If ever you have the chance to meet him, be sure and embrace it. You'll want to disagree with everything he says, but you'll find him interesting."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, all about him."

"He must be a smart fellow, I should think. Should you not like to meet him?"

"I'm not sure. Of course, you know that Bridget is rather given to enthuse. Still, a clever person is always interesting."

"Because," said Mr. Castlemaine slowly, "it is rather a strange coincidence."

"What is?"

"Why, this same Mr. Radford Leicester is one of the two men who are coming to dine here to-night."

"It'll be interesting to compare notes with Bridget,"

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said Olive, after a moment's hesitation. "But why is he coming here?"

"Oh, a Mr. Lowry, a sort of local magnate in the neighbourhood of Taviton, wishes to see me on a matter of some importance, and he has asked this Mr. Leicester to be his spokesman. I did not wish to be in town to-night, so I asked him to come here to dinner."

"And to spend the night?"

"No. They will return to town. There is a train about twelve."

But for her friend's letter Olive Castlemaine would have paid no attention to the fact that two men were coming to dine, but remembering what she had just read she felt rather desirous of seeing Mr. Radford Leicester. Perhaps that was why she told her maid to take special care in selecting a dress that night, and why, just after seven o'clock, Olive made her way to the drawing-room with more than usual interest.

She heard steps and voices in the hall just before the dinner-hour, and a few minutes later the two visitors were announced.

John Castlemaine introduced them to his daughter, and then watched her face with an amused smile. Perhaps he wondered if her opinion tallied with that of the letter she had received that very day. Mr. Lowry caused no interest. He was simply a commonplace man who had succeeded in becoming rich. Olive had seen such by the dozen, and valued them at their true worth. But few of them were interesting. As a rule, they looked at everything through the medium of money. To them passing events were of interest because of the effect they might have upon the financial

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market. And even here their outlook was narrow and superficial. It was evident, however, that Radford Leicester did interest her. He was a perfect contrast to the commonplace, corpulent man of business. Mr. Lowry seemed rather awed by coming into the home of one who stood so high in the commercial world. He was impressed by the quiet dignity of the great house. The old-fashioned, costly furniture, the sombre richness of everything, gave a feeling of repose to which his own house was a stranger. He wondered why it was so. He had given instructions to the manager of one of the largest furnishing establishments in Tottenham Court Road to spare no expense either in decorating or furnishing the mansion he had built, and although they had obeyed him he knew that it was different from this. As a consequence he felt ill at ease, and he stammered when Olive spoke to him. But Radford Leicester was different. He was perfectly at ease in the great drawing-room, and placed himself in the right relationship towards every one immediately. And yet a careful observer could see that he was more than usually interested. His large eyes flashed when he saw Olive Castlemaine. He had seen her only once before, and then had not been introduced to her. If he had given her a thought, it was only to regard her as the daughter of a very rich City man, and that she was said to be very religious. Now, however, all was different. While under the influence of whisky he had made a wager that he would win this woman's consent to be his wife, and now that they met face to face he had strange feelings. The first was a feeling of shame. He would not have admitted it even to himself, but he knew the feeling was in his heart

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For another thing, he doubted himself. Before a word was spoken he knew that this woman was no shallow creature to be carried away by high-sounding phrases. Neither would she mistake cynical opinion, cleverly expressed, for truth. He almost felt afraid of the large brown eyes which were lifted so fearlessly to his.

When he had entered the house he, like Mr. Lowry, had felt the quiet dignity and the atmosphere of cultured refinement which prevailed.

"Who has created this," he asked himself, "the father or the daughter?"

"It is not the father," he concluded before John Castlemaine had spoken a dozen words. It was true that John Castlemaine bore an untarnished reputation for honour and uprightness, but he was not a cultured man; he would never give the house its tone. There were a hundred things which suggested the artist's feeling, the scholar's taste. When he saw Olive Castlemaine, he had no further doubt.

And he felt ashamed. Not that his opinions about women in general were altered. His experiences had been too bitter. He simply felt that his conversation in the club in London a week or so before was, to say the least of it, in bad taste. He did not mean to go back upon his words; that was not his habit. Besides, the difficulties which presented themselves made him more determined to carry his plans into effect.

As for Olive, she felt that her friend had estimated this man rightly—at least in part. He was a striking-looking man; he was a clever man. The florid merchant by his side looked mean and common compared with him. The quiet masterfulness of Leicester impressed her. He suggested a reserve of strength

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and knowledge which she had never before felt when brought into contact with other political aspirants. She knew the general type of Parliamentary candidates. Some had made money and wanted to have the honour associated with the British House of Legislature; others, again, were brought up with the idea of adopting the political life as a career. Neither in the one case nor the other were they men of note; they would be simply voting machines, even if they entered the House of Commons—just dull, uninteresting men, who had never grasped the principles which govern a nation's life.

But this man was different. The strong chin, the well-shaped head, the large grey eyes, could only mean a man of more than ordinary note.

They sat near each other at dinner, and all the time Radford Leicester was seeking to weigh Olive Castlemaine in the balance of his own opinions.

"I hope none of those fellows will let the wager leak out," he said to himself. "The girl makes me angry. What business has a rich City man's daughter—a religious woman and a Nonconformist—to look with searching eyes like that? I must be careful."

"You are an admirer of Tolstoi, Miss Castlemaine," he said, glancing towards a picture on the wall.

"You say that because of his picture," she replied. "An artist friend of ours knows the family. He paid a visit to Tolstoi's home, and the Count consented to sit for his picture. I believe it is very good."

"But you admire him?"

"Why do you think so?"

"Because you allow his picture to hang on your wall."

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"You forget that my father would naturally govern such matters."

"I should not imagine that your father would elect to give honour to a man of Tolstoi's views."

"My father greatly admires the artist's work."

"But not this one. You are quite right, Mr. Leicester," said Mr. Castlemaine, who had overheard their conversation. "I am not an admirer of this Russian's revolutionary ideas. My daughter and I had quite an argument about this picture."

"And Miss Castlemaine had the best of it."

"What man was ever equal to a woman in argument?" said Mr. Castlemaine good-humouredly. "Yes, what were you saying, Mr. Lowry?"

"Why do you admire him?" asked Radford Leicester, turning to Olive.

"A woman always admires strength, courage, honesty," replied Olive.

"And which most?"

"Honesty."

"That is interesting. Might one ask why?"

"Because the other two do not exist without it."

Radford Leicester did not repress the answer that rose to his lips. He could not be altogether a hypocrite, even to carry out his plans.

"That is a very respectable tradition," he said.

"You do not believe it?"

"I would not try to destroy it for worlds," he said.

"I can feel the whole constitution rattling about my ears at the very thought of its destruction."

"But you do not believe it?"

"What would you say if I told you I did not?"

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"I should say that Tolstoi's life would prove you in the wrong."

"Have you ever considered what a complex thing humanity is, Miss Castlemaine? I have known honest men—that is, as honest men go—as timid as rabbits, and I have known scoundrels who have been as brave as lions. Is not human nature constantly laughing at us?"

"That is because our judgments are so shallow. We do not look beneath the surface."

"Yes, doubtless you are right. But my main objection to the so-called honest man is that he is so frightfully dull."

"To say the least of him, Tolstoi is not dull."

"Therefore he is not honest."

"Surely a sweeping conclusion from a very uncertain premiss."

"No, not uncertain."

"No? May I ask how you can prove it true?"

"By constantly meeting with men—and women."

"You mean that all the honest people you have met with are dull?"

"Pardon me, I am not sure I have ever met with an honest man. But I have met with those who are called honest, and——"

The girl looked at him steadily. She was not sure whether he was in earnest. It is true his face was perfectly serious, and yet she thought she detected a mocking tone in his voice.

"Children, for example," she said. "The most interesting children are those who are least self-conscious. The moment they become self-conscious and begin to act a part they cease to be attractive."

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"Then you think that all but children are dull?"

"Why do you say so?"

"Because all grown-up people are acting a part."

"Again, are we not still on the surface?"

"No, we are down very deep. We are considering life. Life is simply acting a part. Why we act the parts we do is difficult to tell. Only I have noticed this: in life, as on the stage, those who elect to act the part of the good honest person are invariably dull. It is your villain who interests, and your villain who does the daring things—except in melodrama," he added quickly.

"What an unfortunate man you must be, Mr. Leicester," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you have been so unfortunate in the society you have frequented."

"Oh no, I have been singularly fortunate."

"Yes?"

"Yes, on the whole, I have found people wonderfully interesting."

What did he mean by talking in this fashion? Olive Castlemaine tried to answer the question, but was baffled. She was sure he was not such a little man as to pride himself upon breaking away from recognised rules of life simply for the sake of appearing odd. She was about to lead the conversation into another direction when a servant came bearing a card.

"Mr. Purvis," said John Castlemaine. "I wonder if he has had his dinner."

Olive Castlemaine and Radford Leicester looked at each other, they hardly knew why, and each thought that the other looked uncomfortable.

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CHAPTER IV

A DOUBLE PERSONALITY

A FEW minutes later Purvis sat at the dinner-table. It appeared that he wished to see Mr. Castlemaine, and not knowing he would be engaged, had taken the liberty of calling. He seemed surprised at seeing Leicester there, but naturally said nothing. As for Leicester, his interest in the gathering seemed to evaporate at Purvis's entrance. He suddenly became rather moody, and when he spoke, addressed his remarks to Mr. Castlemaine rather than to his daughter. This evidently pleased Purvis, who became quite cheerful at Leicester's gloomy demeanour.

Presently dinner came to an end, when Olive went away into the drawing-room, while the men adjourned to the library. Mr. Lowry seemed rather annoyed at Purvis's presence, but made the best of the situation by talking to Mr. Castlemaine in low tones.

"You are abstemious to-night, Leicester," said Purvis.

"Indeed!"

"Yes, after all, you are not willing for her to know all the truth."

Leicester did not reply.

"Surely you are not going on with this business?"

"Else why am I here?"

"But you are to let her know your character in full."

"No man's character is known in full."

"But—but——"

"Look here, Purvis, I shall play the game. See that you do," and he gave the young man a glance which made him slightly uncomfortable.

"Of course—of course," he said nervously. "I don't like it. Still, there's no danger—that is, there will not be when she knows everything."

"Which you will see to."

"I shall tell her nothing of our conversation; as for the rest—well, there will be no need for me to tell her that."

Leicester gave the other a look which was almost angry.

"No," he said, "I daresay you are right. A man's so-called vices soon become public property. Of course," he went on, "you will talk with her about me."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, you will. You will let her know all the world says, and a little more."

"I say, Leicester."

"Oh, don't grow indignant, my dear fellow. I know the worth of your indignation; besides, I only wanted to tell you that you are quite at liberty to say what you like."

"You mean that?"

"Oh, certainly. Of course the wager is a secret. As for the rest, I authorise you to give your imagination full scope. I say, Purvis, I imagine Mr. Castlemaine and Mr. Lowry wish to talk with me about a private matter. I'm sure you don't mind, do you?"

and Miss Castlemaine will be lonely. I'm not in the least jealous, my dear fellow."

Mr. Castlemaine was much impressed with the way Leicester stated the affair which Mr. Lowry wished to bring before him. Everything was so carefully thought out, and so clearly expressed, that the man who was accustomed to deal with vast business enterprises was simply delighted. As he declared afterwards, it was quite an intellectual treat to talk with such a man. Besides, he made the conversation so interesting by introducing matters which appealed to John Castlemaine's tastes, that he felt like insisting on him staying the night. As a rule, whenever he talked of business matters in his own house, which was very seldom, he got through it as quickly as possible. P to-night all was different. When the business conversation came to an end, he still continued to talk.

"By the way," he remarked when Leicester had said something which more than ordinarily amused him, "my daughter ought to hear that, and we might as well go into the drawing-room. You've finished your cigar, haven't you?"

Leicester threw his cigar-end into the grate, and having finished his whisky, he followed his host.

They found Purvis eagerly talking with Miss Castlemaine, and Leicester knew the moment he entered that he had been the subject of their conversation. She gave him a quick, searching glance, as if she could scarcely believe what Purvis had been telling her. The look made him angry. He had told Purvis that he was at liberty to make known his character, and yet he keenly resented his communication. There had been times when he had taken pleasure in his

peculiar reputation ; but to-day everything seemed different. Still Leicester was not a man who shrunk from a difficult situation ; indeed, he presently found himself possessed with a sort of savage joy, as he found himself uttering sentiments which had become commonplaces to men of his way of thinking. Moreover, he seemed desirous of showing Purvis that he did not desire to hide from Miss Castlemaine the kind of man he really was.

"I hear you are making great progress in your constituency down in Devonshire, Leicester," said Purvis.

"Oh yes, we are enjoying ourselves hugely down there," was the reply.

"For my own part, I do not find it fun to nurse a constituency," said Purvis.

"That's because you do not look on the humorous side of the question," replied Leicester. "When one regards the whole business in the same light as that in which a boy plays a game of marbles, it is great fun."

"I cannot think of the Government of my country in that light," said Purvis loftily.

"No," said Leicester quietly ; "well, tastes differ. Politics are just what you make them, comedy or serious drama. And I prefer comedy."

"Thus it too often becomes a fiasco. A man becomes a member of Parliament for the good of his country. He sacrifices his time and money for the welfare of his fellow-creatures. At least he should. I know of no higher calling than to be a legislator in one's own land. It is not fun, it is duty."

"The greatest comedy I know of," said Leicester,

"is the pretence to be serious. I never laugh so immoderately as I do at so-called serious drama. One can so easily see the make-up of the whole business. The passion, the pathos, the high moral sentiment, the remorse, it is all got up for the occasion—and it is great fun."

"But politics are different from the drama."

"Are they? I have never had much to do with the dramatic world, but I am told that managers run theatres to make money for themselves by amusing the spectators. When comedy fails, they try tragedy. Politics are pretty much the same. Politicians put pieces on the stage to amuse the spectators, and thereby benefit themselves. When they fail to obtain the support of the audience—well, they are kicked off the stage and another set of actors put on."

"Only in politics the actors don't make money."

"No," said Leicester quietly, "they don't, at least not many. But they are inspired by the same motive as the actor is."

"And that?"

"Self, my dear fellow, self. The *bond fide* actor is generally poor, and he seeks money and popularity. The politician does not always want money, but he wants fame. He wants to lift his head above the crowd, he wants to be mentioned in the newspapers, he wants to be singled out as he passes along the stage of life. Does the actor care a fig about the welfare of the spectators? All he wants is their money and their applause. Does the politician care a fig about the welfare of the voter? Still, it's great fun."

"Come, come, Mr. Leicester," said Mr. Lowry, "it

wouldn't do for the people down at Taviton to hear you say such things."

"Exactly," said Leicester; "the people like to be fooled. Therefore the best thing is to fool them. Besides, is it not all a part of one great show? We are puppets on the stage of life, and we have to play our part. And each plays it with his eye on the audience."

"Personally," said Purvis, "I should not spend time and money for such a purpose. I know it may sound like boasting; but I would give up politics to-morrow but for the good of my country."

"Some time ago," said Leicester mockingly, "I was invited to speak at a political meeting, to assist the candidature of a young politician, who is supposed to be filled with very noble sentiments. I went and listened to this young politician. During his speech a man interrupted. The speaker tried to answer him, and failed. The man continued his interruption. At last some one shouted, 'Don't trouble about him, he hasn't got a vote.' Immediately this young, high-souled politician said, 'I came to speak to electors, not to men who have no vote, and therefore no stake in the country.' Exactly. But think a moment. Who was this interrupter? He was a man with a life to live. He had his burdens to bear and his battles to fight. But he was not a voter, he could not help to send him to Parliament, therefore——" and Leicester shrugged his shoulders.

During this speech Purvis looked more and more angry. The blood mounted to his face and he shifted in his seat. Moreover, he saw that the eyes of the others were upon him, which did not add to his comfort.

"Yes, it's great fun," went on Leicester, "this acting on the great stage of life while the audience cheers or groans, as the case may be. But as to motives—well, let them pass."

"But, Mr. Leicester," said Olive, who had keenly enjoyed the conversation, partly because she was not sure whether Leicester was serious or only joking, "are you not forgetting that there are conscientious artists? Are there not artists who live for their art and care nothing about praise or blame?"

"Is not that another form of selfishness?" remarked Leicester.

"But surely, Leicester," said Purvis, "you do not mean that you confess to these sordid motives;—that you regard politics as only a game to play, in order to win applause? Do you mean to say that you are no better than the crowd you describe?"

"My dear fellow, I am a great deal better, for the simple truth that I am honest. I don't profess to having these high sentiments which some boast of."

"The last time I heard you speak," said Purvis, "you spoke in no measured terms of the present Government. You declared it to be the bounden duty of the country to thrust it from power. Why did you say this if one party is as good as another, and all men uniformly selfish?"

"Because they do not play the game well," replied Leicester quietly; "because they make false moves, and because it grates upon one's artistic feelings to see a thing done badly. I would for the same reason hoot an orchestra off a platform for making discords. To begin with, the present Government have a very poor piece, and, secondly, they play it very badly. Miss

Castlemaine," he added, turning to Olive, "please forgive us for talking in this way; but you see we are all alike. All men talk shop, just the same as women do."

"The part you are acting now is very interesting to me," said Olive, with a laugh.

"And to me also," said Leicester, looking at Purvis.

"Indeed, when one comes to think of it, all parts played seriously, especially when a great deal depends on the way one plays them, are tremendously interesting."

"Then you admit you are acting a part?"

"Are we not all acting a part?" replied Leicester.

"And for the amusement of the audience?"

"And for selfish purposes? Else why do we act?"

The girl looked at him steadily, as if trying to read his thoughts. That she was interested in him she had to admit, not so much because of what he said, as because of his strong personality. She could not help feeling that he was the dominating influence in the room. She did not believe in the opinions to which he had given expression, neither did she believe that he believed in them; nevertheless he uttered them with such an air of conviction that he impressed her in spite of herself.

"My reading of life is utterly different from yours," she said presently. "Did Charles Lamb act a part when he sacrificed the woman he loved and the life he hoped to live in order to give his life to protect his poor mad sister?"

"Charles Lamb has never ceased to be praised since he did it," remarked Leicester.

"But he never thought of the praise at the time," said Olive.

"No, I will admit that you've brought a strong

exception which proves the rule," said Leicester, "and yet poor Lamb was a drunkard."

He looked at Purvis as he spoke, as if to remind him that he was playing his part fairly.

"Of course that was a terrible weakness of Lamb's," said Olive, "and yet one cannot help feeling kindly towards him. He was so penitent, so contrite; besides, he has gladdened the world by his bright, cheery outlook on life. Even from your standpoint, the man who looks for the evil in life plays his part badly. It is he who looks for the good and the beautiful that really helps the spectators."

"I think otherwise," remarked Leicester. "The doctor who exposes a disease, and fights it, is he who is the greatest benefactor."

"To expose a disease without fighting it, on the other hand, is of but little use," said Olive; "besides, it seems to me that the greatest physician is he who teaches us to live such healthy lives that the diseases find in us nothing to live on. The best remedy against the encroachment of disease is strong, vigorous health."

"But how to obtain that strong, vigorous health, Miss Castlemaine, is not that the great question?"

"By breathing pure air. By partaking of pure food, mental and moral, as well as physical," she replied. "The conversation so far has made me feel quite morbid."

John Castlemaine and Mr. Lowry laughed heartily, while Purvis heaved a sigh of relief. He had wondered how this conversation affected Olive, and he rejoiced that it had not pleased her. As for Leicester, he gave her a quick glance of admiration. He was glad that Winfield had mentioned her. Here at least was a

woman better worth winning than any he had ever seen. Again he felt ashamed of the conversation that had taken place at the club, even while he was more than ever determined to prove to Purvis and Sprague that he was right in his contention.

"At any rate, Purvis cannot accuse me of hiding my opinions," he said to himself, and then he turned the course of the conversation.

During the rest of the evening Leicester seemed to forget his sad, hopeless opinions, and he completely restored the good opinion which John Castlemaine had formed concerning him at first, and which he had well-nigh lost during the time when Leicester was giving expression to his cynical views. And this was no wonder, for even Purvis himself was well-nigh carried away by his cleverness. He spoke well concerning current books and current events. He compared notes with Olive concerning places both had visited and books which both had read. He exerted himself to be agreeable, and he succeeded vastly. Perhaps the atmosphere of the house helped him, perhaps he found in Olive one who helped to restore his good opinion of womanhood; perhaps he realised his determination to win his wager and obtain the promise of Olive Castlemaine to be his wife. Be that as it may, the Radford Leicester of the early part of the evening was not the Radford Leicester of the latter.

Olive felt this. He reminded her of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. His dual personality became somewhat of a problem. Which was the real man? Both were interesting—almost fascinating. He was clever when the pessimistic mood was upon him; he

was far more clever when he became the student and the scholar, talking brilliantly of books, of architecture, of art, and of the struggling, troubled life of humanity.

Concerning religion he said nothing. Once or twice, when Olive introduced the subject into their conversation, he avoided it. Perhaps he shrank from expressing his lack of faith in those truths by which, to Olive, all the opinions of men must be tested; but of other things he spoke freely and well. Moreover, the girl helped him. Her straightforwardness, her freedom from petty meannesses, and her wide, intelligent outlook on life made him for the moment forget his oft-expressed opinion of women. Besides, he had his part to play, and he played it.

Presently a servant came saying that Mr. Lowry's motor-car was at the door.

"You are not going up to town by train?" said Mr. Castlemaine.

"No, I had the car in London, and I thought I might as well use it," replied Mr. Lowry; "besides, I can get back quicker in the car."

"Yes," replied Mr. Castlemaine, "I suppose so; but, personally, I would rather be behind a pair of good horses. I am really sorry you have to go so soon," he said, turning to Leicester. "I am very glad to have met you. I hope we shall see more of each other."

Purvis looked angrily at Leicester as he heard John Castlemaine say this, but he said nothing; he was a little afraid.

"Are you going back to London, Purvis?" asked Leicester. "If you are, I'm sure Mr. Lowry will be glad to give you a lift."

"Thank you," said Purvis; then, as an afterthought, he added, "I should like a word with Mr. Castlemaine before I go. We have all been so interested in Mr. Leicester's opinions that I had almost forgotten the errand on which I came."

For a minute Leicester was alone with Olive.

"I have to thank you for a pleasant evening, Miss Castlemaine," he said, "one of the few pleasant evenings of my life."

She looked up at him inquiringly.

"I mean what I say," he said. "While we were at dinner I told you that I had found life very interesting. I told you a lie. Why I told it I don't know. It slipped from my tongue before I realised what I was saying. I have not found life interesting, I have found it anything but that—anything. But this evening has been an oasis in the desert, and I thank you."

"I am glad you have had a pleasant evening," said Olive quietly; nevertheless she wondered how much truth there was in his words.

"You do not believe me," he said, "but what I say is perfectly true. I do not find the stage of life very interesting to act on."

"Then it is best not to act," said Olive.

"That is not a matter of choice."

"I think it is. One can choose to play a part, or he can choose to live a life."

"The same thing," he replied.

"Pardon me, I do not think so."

"All the same, I thank you for a pleasant evening. When one has very few of them, it is a great deal to be thankful for."

There was something in the tones of his voice that convinced her that he meant what he said. She reflected that his face was sad, and that there was no joy in his eyes.

"Forgive me, a stranger, asking a question," he went on. "Do you find life happy?"

"Exceedingly."

"That is interesting. I wish I knew your secret."

"By ceasing to play a part."

She had not meant to say this; but the words escaped her before she realised them.

"How can one do that?"

"By seeking to serve the spectators, instead of pleasing them."

He laughed almost bitterly.

"If the spectators were only worth it," he said. He held out his hand. "Good-night, Miss Castlemaine," he said; "thank you again very much."

He walked into the hall, where Mr. Lowry stood awaiting him.

"Is Purvis ready?"

"He is talking with Mr. Castlemaine."

Instinctively Leicester felt that he was the subject of the conversation, and Leicester was right.

Purvis had explained his visit to Mr. Castlemaine in a very few words, then he said, "A funny fellow—Leicester, isn't he?"

"He is no ordinary man," said Mr. Castlemaine. "He should have a great career."

Purvis shook his head.

"You do not think so?"

"I do not deny his cleverness," said Purvis. "That is generally recognised; but—but——"

"Oh, I take but little notice of his joking," said John Castlemaine, "for he was joking."

"No, he was not joking."

"You mean that——"

"He believes in nothing—neither in God nor man. He does not believe in the commonplaces of Christian morality. He makes a boast of his atheism."

Mr. Castlemaine looked serious.

"That is a great pity for the poor fellow," he said.

"But that's not the worst," said Purvis.

"No?"

"No; it's an awful pity, but he's a hard drinker."

"Ah, I'm very sorry, for he struck me as a man with great possibilities."

Mr. Castlemaine did not seem to enjoy Purvis's conversation, and he moved into the hall, to bid his guests good-night.

During the ride to London Leicester was very silent. The car swept swiftly along the now almost empty roads, and presently stood outside the club where we first met the man whose story I am trying to tell.

Directly they entered the smoking-room, Leicester ordered a large whisky, which he drank quickly. It seemed as though his abstinence at Mr. Castlemaine's had caused cravings which he was eager to appease.

"Well," said Purvis presently, "you've taken the first step."

"Yes, I've taken the first step."

"I say, Leicester, give it up—it's not right."

Leicester shrugged his shoulders.

"Even if you succeeded it would be——"

"You mean that I am not worthy of her?"

"You know that yourself."

Leicester laughed.

"You see you rush to whisky the moment you get back."

"Well, she knows all about it."

"How?"

"You told her—and you told her father too."

Purvis's eyes dropped.

"Oh, don't be downcast, my dear fellow," said Leicester mockingly. "I gave you liberty to tell them, and you took advantage of my permission. And you told her all the rest, too. Oh, I know you well enough for that, and on the whole I'm glad. But mind," and he rose to his feet like a man in anger, "if you let on about the rest——"

"You mean the wager?"

"Call it what you like—if you or Sprague let on about that, then, to quote your Bible, it were better that a millstone were hanged about your neck, and you were cast into the depths of the sea."

Purvis shrank before the savage gleam of the man's eye.

"You—you surely don't mean that—that you are going on with—with this business?"

"Yes, I am," replied Leicester. His voice was quiet, but he spoke like a man in anger. "I am going on, and—and—if you do not play the game—well, you know me, Purvis."

"Of course a promise is a promise," said Purvis; "all the same——"

"Go to bed, my son," said Leicester mockingly. "I think you'll be all right now."

If Purvis had remained he would have been almost frightened at the look which came into Leicester's eyes.

CHAPTER V

THE STRENGTHENING OF THE CHAIN

FOR the next few days following the night of the dinner at John Castlemaine's house, a change seemed to have come over Radford Leicester. He became less hopeless, and he did not drink so freely. It might seem as though an evening spent in the society of a good woman had a beneficial effect upon him. He did not take any further steps to carry out his avowed intention, but when he spoke of women it was with less bitterness.

Both Sprague and Purvis noticed this, and both wondered what it portended. Could it be that Leicester meant to reform, or did it mean that he was simply playing a part, in order to win the woman he had boasted he could win?

Nevertheless he was moody, and seemed unhappy. He met these men sometimes at the club, but spoke little. Moreover, in public he was very abstemious, so much so that even the waiter noticed it.

"Is he turning over a new leaf?" asked Purvis of Sprague.

"If he is, he is not playing the game," replied the other.

"Why do you say that?"

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"Because it was understood that he should win her on the understanding that he was an atheist and a drunkard."

"But surely you don't object to his reforming?"

"No, of course I should be only too glad if he did, only in that case all the point of our discussion would be gone."

They were, during this conversation, sitting in the club where we first met them, and just as Purvis was about to reply to the other Leicester entered the room. He looked even paler than usual, and the dark rings around his eyes suggested pain either physical or mental. No sooner did he see them than he walked towards them, as if glad of an opportunity of companionship.

"How are you, Leicester?"

"I have a beastly headache," he replied.

Sprague and Purvis looked at each other significantly, a look which Leicester noticed.

"No," he said, "don't draw your conclusions. I have not been drinking. It's that confounded constituency."

"Why, anything happened there?"

"No—nothing of importance. It's only the old game. This man has to be written to, and the other man has to have a certain statement explained. I'd give up the whole thing for twopence."

"Where would your career be then, Leicester?"

"Hang the career," he said moodily.

"It's all very well to say that, old man, but a great deal depends on it."

"What?"

"Well, your future—your future in Parliament, and your future matrimonial arrangements."

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He gave the two men an angry look.

"Surely that's my affair," he said.

"Sorry to contradict you, old man; but it is our affair too. That hundred pounds, you know."

Leicester gave expression to a sentiment which was more forcible than elegant.

Sprague looked at him eagerly. Ever since the night when we first met these men, he had cherished anger in his heart towards Leicester. He felt that this man despised him, and he was glad of the opportunity of giving him one, as he termed it, "on his own account."

"Our gallant warrior is afraid to fight," he said with a sneer.

Leicester started as though he were stung. The look on Sprague's face maddened him. For Leicester was in a nervous condition that night. His abstention from spirits was telling on him terribly. Every fibre of his being was crying out for whisky, and every nerve seemed on edge.

"What do you mean, Sprague?" he demanded.

"I mean that our gallant warrior is pulling down his flag," said Sprague. "He has found out that the citadel cannot be easily taken, and he's ready to give up without striking a blow."

Leicester looked on the ground moodily. In his heart of hearts he was ashamed of the whole business, but he felt he would rather do anything than confess it before these fellows.

"I hear he's turned teetotaller, too," went on Sprague, who seemed anxious to pay off old scores. "Who knows? we may see Leicester posing as a temperance advocate yet."

Leicester rose to his feet as if unable to contain

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himself. To be sneered at by a man like Sprague was too much. He seemed about to give vent to an insulting remark, then as if thinking better of it checked himself. He rung a bell which stood on the table.

A waiter came in answer to his summons.

"Whisky," he said.

"A large or a small one, sir?"

"Bring—bring a bottle," he said savagely.

"I say, Leicester, don't do that!" said Purvis.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't start drinking again."

Again Leicester was almost overwhelmed with anger. How dare these fellows seek to interfere with him!

"May I ask my dear Moody and Sankey when the control of my actions came within your province?" he said, with a strong effort at self-control.

"Don't take it in that way, old man. I'm sure you are ashamed of the other business, and——"

"What business?"

"You know what business. You can't go on with it. You would never have thought of it if you hadn't been drinking too much; and really, I was awfully glad when I saw that you were giving it up."

Leicester did not reply, but instead looked eagerly towards the waiter, who was coming towards him.

He poured out a large portion of whisky into a glass, and then, having added a small quantity of soda-water, he took a long draught.

"There," he said, when he set down the glass empty, "that for your pious platitudes, my friends."

The action seemed to restore something of his equanimity, and it also brought back the old bravado which had characterised him.

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"The brave warrior appears to require Dutch courage," remarked Sprague, who seemed bent on arousing all that was evil in him.

"Better that than none at all," remarked Leicester quietly. "And let me tell you this, my friend, you can tell your mother that I shall not assist you in your drawing-room meetings. By the way, what line are you on now? Is it Hottentot children, anti-smoking, or the conversion of the Jews?"

The colour had risen to his cheeks, the old light had come back to his eyes.

"As if I cared for your Dorcas meeting standards of morality," he went on. "What, you thought the poor sinner was repenting, eh? And you had all your texts, and your rag-tags of advice to pour into my willing ears. Tell me, Sprague, have you selected one of your women speakers to speak a word in season? You know how partial I am to public women."

"You tried to give up the drink for a whole week for one," retorted Sprague angrily.

"Did I, now? Well, then, I'll make up for my past misdeeds. I repent of my backsliding, my dear pastor, and I return to my spiritual comforter."

He poured out more whisky, still with a steady hand, and looked at them with a mocking smile.

"Have faith, Sprague," he said; "have faith, as your favourite women speakers say so eloquently at those dear drawing-room meetings which you love so much, 'there's nothing done without faith.'"

Purvis, who was the better fellow of the two, looked really distressed. He was ashamed of what had taken place, and had sincerely hoped that Leicester had given up the wild scheme upon which they had embarked.

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"I am sorry for all this, Leicester," he said, "and I confess frankly I hoped——"

"That I had been brought to the stool of repentance, that I was ashamed of my misdeeds, and that I was going to give up the game. No, my friends, I stand by what I said, and what is more, I am going to carry it through. I am not converted to your professed belief in the nobility of women, and as for being ashamed—tah, as though I cared for your copybook morality!"

Neither of the men spoke in reply. They were almost afraid of the man. He spoke quietly, and yet the strange light in his eyes showed how much moved he was.

"And what is more, dear Moody and Sankey," he went on, "I'll play the game honestly. I'll hide none of my sentiments. I'll win this woman under no false colours. Why should I? There is no need. What did I say? Let women have their selfish ambition gratified, and nothing else matters."

"Come now, Leicester, you know it is not so. I should think your visit to Mr. Castlemaine's would at least have caused you to drop that rubbish."

He had by this time finished his second glass of whisky, and while as on the former occasion it showed no effects on his perfect articulation, and while he spoke very quietly, it doubtless made him say and do what without its influence he would never think of doing.

"I say, Purvis," he said, lying back comfortably in his chair, and lighting a cigar, "did I hide my sentiments at Mr. Castlemaine's? Did I pose as a moral reformer? And what is more, did you spare me?"

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Did you not, with great and loyal friendship, give both Mr. and Miss Castlemaine your views concerning me? Did you not tell Miss Castlemaine of my reputation at Oxford, and of my terrible opinions? Did you not tell Mr. Castlemaine that I was an atheist, that I had laughed at Christian morality, and that I was a hard drinker? Come now, deny it if you can."

"You know what you said to me," said Purvis, looking on the floor like a man ashamed.

"Of course I did, my dear fellow. Don't look so miserable about it. Well, I did my worst, and you did your worst. Now look at that!"

He threw a letter to Purvis as he spoke.

"Am I to read it?"

"Else why did I give it you?"

Purvis opened the letter and read it. It was an invitation to Mr. Castlemaine's to dinner.

"Are you going?" asked Purvis.

"Of course I am. Do you think I am going to let such an opportunity slip? Oh, you need not be afraid to show it to Sprague. It is not an invitation to a drawing-room meeting, it is only to a dinner."

"Well, that means nothing," said Sprague.

"No? I think it proves my statements to the hilt. That invitation would not have come from John Castlemaine without his daughter's consent—perhaps it was at her instigation. And yet she knows that I am—well—all you've described me to be. I am an atheist, I've thrown copybook morals overboard, I am a hard drinker. But what then? I conform to the conventions; no man has ever seen me drunk; but more than all that, I am mentioned as one who is going to have a brilliant career. Hence the invitation."

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"An invitation to dinner means nothing," urged Sprague.

"Hence the invitation, and hence the future justification of my statements," he persisted. "Good-night, my friends, I am sorry I cannot stay longer."

He walked out of the room quite gaily. A casual passer-by, if he had met him, would at that moment have thought of him as a happy man.

And yet, although Sprague and Purvis did not know it, Leicester had entered the smoking-room of the club that night with a strong inclination to refuse the invitation to John Castlemaine's house. He *had* been ashamed of making a woman the subject of a wager, and more, he had for several days been fighting against the craving for alcohol. He realised more than any man the mastery which it had gained over him, and he knew that unless he conquered the habit, he would soon be a slave to it, body and soul. An evening spent in the society of a good woman, moreover, had aroused his latent manhood, and he felt that he could not degrade himself by standing by the challenge he had made. He knew as well as they that it was made under the influence of whisky, and that no man of honour should stand by it.

During the days he had been fighting his craving for drink, the thought of what he had done became more and more repugnant, and when he entered the room where Sprague and Purvis were, he intended telling them that nothing more must be said about it.

It seemed, however, that the fates were against him. He was in a nervous, irritable mood, caused by his abstention from the poison which had become almost a necessity to him, and the significant glances of the

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two men maddened him. Had they met him in the right spirit, it is possible that the affair, which did not reflect credit upon any of them, might have been dismissed as an idle joke. As we have seen, however, they had taunted him, they had aroused him to anger; these men whom he regarded as his inferiors had assumed an air of superiority, and this in the present state of his nerves was more than he could bear. He had ordered whisky, and after that his good resolutions went by the board. Radford Leicester would have died rather than have confessed himself beaten. Thus do great issues often rest upon unimportant events.

After he had gone a silence fell between the two young men for some time.

"I wish we hadn't been such fools, Sprague," said Purvis presently.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that we are as bad as he is, perhaps worse. We at least were sober."

"Yes, I know; but who would have thought that he would stand by his guns?"

"We know what he is. I believe if we had been wise to-night he might have been led to give it up. But now nothing will move him."

"Well, it may teach Miss Castlemaine a lesson," said Sprague, whose pride had not yet recovered from the wound which her refusal had made; "but there—it's all right. It'll never come to anything. For that matter, if anything serious came of it, I would tell her the whole history of the joke."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because you dare not Because she would despise

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us all to our last day, because she would never speak to us again. You know the kind of girl she is."

Sprague was silent.

"Is it a dinner-party which Mr. Castlemaine is giving, or is Leicester invited in a friendly way, I wonder?" he said presently.

"Evidently a friendly invitation, seeing Mr. Castlemaine has written the letter with his own hand."

"Was it true that you told Mr. Castlemaine the truth about him?"

Purvis looked uncomfortable.

"Evidently he did not believe it," he replied, after hesitating a few seconds. "You know Leicester's way. When you look into those wonderful eyes of his you cannot tell whether he's joking or whether he's in earnest. Besides, he's such a handsome, fascinating chap, and I saw that Mr. Castlemaine took to him. Then, although it is perfectly true that he talked in his usual mocking way during a part of the evening, he altered his tone before he left. Evidently he found Miss Castlemaine to be a congenial companion, for he grew quite earnest in his conversation, and you know that when he is earnest, he is nothing short of brilliant. In fact, he showed us two Radford Leicesters that night: we had Leicester the cynic, but we had also Leicester the scholar, the brilliant conversationalist, the man who has read everything worth reading, and seen everything worth the seeing. No one could help noticing how Miss Castlemaine admired him."

"And you believe he'll carry this thing through now?"

"I'm sure he'll propose to her. Didn't you see his eyes? And you know what a fellow he is. When

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once he sets his mind upon a thing he'll go straight on. Ordinary considerations do not daunt him. Refusals will only make him more determined. Besides, you wounded his pride to-night, and—well, I wish we had not been such fools. For my own part, I am ashamed of the whole business."

"I tell you we need not fear. We know what Miss Castlemaine is. She is not the kind of woman to be carried away by a handsome presence and clever speeches. It isn't as though this would be her first offer."

"No, but she admires strength. Do you know her favourite characters in history?"

"No."

"Well, just think. The men she admires most are Luther, Richelieu, Cromwell, and Napoleon."

"A curious combination."

"Yes, but each one of them had the same characteristics. All of them were strong men, men who dared great things, played for great stakes."

"Well, Leicester has not dared great things."

"But he's capable of great things. Why, you know as well as I, that when he's in a room, every one else is put in the shade, that is if he cares to exert himself. I tell you Leicester could be a great man, if he only had the motive power."

"But we need have no fear. When did you say he was invited to Mr. Castlemaine's?"

"Next Thursday week."

"I wish we were invited too," said Sprague.

"Who knows?—perhaps we may be."

As a matter of fact they were, and when the night of the dinner came round they both found themselves

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sitting not only in close proximity to Leicester, but also to Miss Olive Castlemaine. For this was one of those rare occasions when John Castlemaine gave a dinner-party.

Radford Leicester sat beside Olive Castlemaine, and all admitted that they were the most striking-looking couple in the room. Had they met in some brilliant society throng, they would have been just as noteworthy. Moreover, this was one of those nights when Radford Leicester found himself in a mood to exert himself, while Olive Castlemaine, as hostess, naturally desired to be agreeable.

For the first part of the dinner but little of note was said. The conversation passed from one topic to another. Motor-cars, a continental exhibition, the latest new novel of note, and the political situation were each discussed in their turn. Society scandal was not indulged in, and the sayings and doings of actresses and music-hall singers were not to be mentioned. Thus, when one comes to think about it, the conversation was of a considerably higher standard than that often indulged in at society functions. But then it must be remembered that John Castlemaine was a middle-class man, who professed the Christian religion, and the atmosphere of his house was not favourable to "smart" talk.

Indeed, if the truth must be told, Radford Leicester grew rather restive under it. He noticed, too, that both Sprague and Purvis were watching him closely, and listening to all he had to say. He instinctively knew of what they were thinking, and more, he felt certain that if his host and hostess were aware of the circumstances which led to his being their guest

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that night, a servant would have shown him to the door. Moreover, although he was not afraid of the outward effect of taking much wine at dinner, he was obliged to be abstemious. Olive Castlemaine had heard of his weakness, and would doubtless take note of the number of times the waiter filled his glass.

Presently, when discussing politics, some one remarked on the amount of self-sacrifice which had been practised by Members of Parliament, especially by those who held a prominent position in the country.

"Mr. Leicester does not believe in that," remarked Purvis. "He is of opinion that it is all great fun."

At this all eyes were turned towards Leicester.

"You are mistaken," he replied, "I believe the self-sacrifice of these men is very great."

"Mr. Leicester has surely altered his opinion of late," remarked Sprague. "Behold, a Saul among the prophets!"

"Not in the slightest, I assure you," replied Leicester. "I believe that hosts of these men sacrifice themselves a great deal. If you ask me who they sacrifice themselves for, I should say—themselves."

"Then the candidate for Taviton sacrifices his leisure for——"

"The candidate for Taviton, exactly. My dear Sprague, you have hit off the situation with your usual felicity."

"I don't think Mr. Leicester is fair to himself," remarked Olive Castlemaine, looking questioningly into Leicester's face.

"I assure you I am," replied Leicester. "Indeed, I am inclined to think that the people who are called self-sacrificing are very undesirable people to associate with."

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"Come, come now, Leicester, you don't believe that," said Purvis.

"I assure you I do most sincerely," replied Leicester quietly. "The other day I was at a house where there were six people present, and they were waiting to play some game where only four could take part. Well, four of them were self-sacrificing people, and wanted to give way to the others. Two were selfish, and desired to engage in the game. Well, neither of these four would give way in their unselfishness—with the result that the game was never played at all. The evening was spoiled by unselfish people."

He looked so serious as he spoke that Olive Castlemaine laughed outright.

"Many an evening which might have been pleasant," went on Leicester, "has been spoiled for me by these unselfish people making themselves and everybody else uncomfortable, under the pretence that they were trying to make us comfortable. Of this I am sure, if people were really and truly honest, and were openly selfish, then each man would seek his own enjoyment and find it."

"And be miserable when he had found it," remarked Olive quietly.

"I assure you that is a fallacy," said Leicester, "else why is it that the so-called moral and unselfish people are the most disagreeable to deal with? This I can say truly, the most morose and unhappy people I have ever met are these moral reformers."

"Then what would you suggest?"

"A good healthy paganism. I know this is an awful heresy, but can any reasonable man say that the English, with all their religious institutions, are as happy as the old Greeks were?"

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"We can't accuse Leicester of hiding his light under a bushel," said Sprague to Purvis, after dinner, during which Leicester continued to talk in the same strain.

"No, but I have yet to see that Miss Castlemaine is repelled by him."

"That's because she believes he is playing a part."

"You believe that she thinks he's been joking?"

"Exactly."

But they were wrong. Olive Castlemaine believed that there was an undertone of sincerity in all Leicester said, and she was sorry for him. During the evening she saw a great deal of him, and although she did not feel quite comfortable in his presence, his personality fascinated her. Indeed, he became quite an enigma to her. Sometimes, when the cynical side of his nature was uppermost, she felt almost sorry that he had been invited to the house, but when he changed and spoke earnestly on matters which interested her, she forgot her feelings of aversion.

Indeed, when all the guests had left the house that night, Olive Castlemaine reflected what a fine man Radford Leicester would be if the sad, hopeless spirit were cast out of him, and he could be inspired by high and noble motives.

"I wonder what would do it?" she asked herself again and again.

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CHAPTER VI

LEICESTER'S WOOING

DURING the next few weeks Radford Leicester and Olive Castlemaine met more than once. By what seemed a strange coincidence Leicester received invitations to houses where Olive Castlemaine had promised to go. They spoke but little on these occasions, nevertheless it was evident that each found the other very interesting. It was noticed, moreover, that Leicester was less cynical and hopeless when in her presence. His eyes shone with a new light, and his voice was resonant with eagerness. She seemed to act upon him as a kind of mental and spiritual tonic. The old bored air passed away when she appeared, and while he seemed to be little interested in the society of others, there could be no doubt that Olive Castlemaine aroused him to earnestness.

When he was with men, he was cold and cynical as ever, neither did he seem to be fighting the habit which had gained such mastery over him. Sprague and Purvis often talked about him, but they had no idea of what he intended to do. True to their promise, they said nothing about the compact which they had made, and while some of Leicester's friends thought he would be a suitor for Miss Castlemaine's hand, others

were just as certain that he was "not a marrying man." But no one seemed certain. Leicester was not a man who gave his confidence freely, and of late he seemed less sociable to his acquaintances than ever. As for friends, he did not possess any.

More than once Purvis and Sprague sought to make him divulge his intentions, but when they asked him questions he looked at them in a way that, to say the least, did not encourage them. When he happened to meet Olive Castlemaine, he was interested, eager, and sometimes almost excited; with others he was moody, taciturn, and evidently far from happy.

At last one day the light of resolution came into his eyes. He lunched at his club, and then, having dressed with great care, he made his way to Olive Castlemaine's home. He had received no invitation, neither did he know whether he would find her in the house. Nevertheless he went. During his journey there, he seemed in deep thought. At the railway station he bought a paper, but he never looked at it. Sometimes he looked out of the window, but evidently he saw nothing. He was as unconscious of his surroundings as a sleep-walker.

Presently he drew near the station which he knew to be the nearest to The Beeches, and then he rose in the carriage and walked between the seats, as though he were considering some course of action.

"Shall I tell her the truth, the whole truth?" he said presently. "Shall I relate to her the miserable——? No, no—not that!" He set his teeth firmly together as he spoke. "No, no—not that!" he repeated, and again he looked out of the carriage window with the same stony stare.

"If she refuses me——" he said presently. "But no, I'll not be refused. If she says no a hundred times, I'll ask her again. I won't, no I *can't* be refused. It would be——"

The man's body grew rigid as he spoke. Evidently Radford Leicester was in a stern mood, and bent upon a mission which affected him deeply.

The train stopped, and the porters shouted the name of the station. He stepped on to the platform and looked around him. Only a very few people had come by the train; the time was yet too early for the City men. Outside the station he engaged a hansom, and told the man to drive him to The Beeches.

"I wonder if she's at home," he said to himself, "and if she is, I wonder if she'll see me?"

There could be no doubt that Radford Leicester was untrue to the creed which he had so often professed. "Nothing is worth while," he had answered many times, when he was asked why he did not take life seriously. But he was serious now. His eyes shone with the light of expectancy and of determination. He did not notice the country through which the cab was passing. He did not realise that, instead of busy streets and tall buildings, there were lanes and quiet meadows. He did not notice that the speculating builder had not been allowed to ruin a pleasant neighbourhood, and that although he was not many miles distant from the heart of London, the district was suggestive of a country village. Yet so it was. John Castlemaine owned all the land around, and he had kept the speculating builder at bay. It is true he had built many workmen's cottages—cottages which reflected credit alike upon his heart and upon his

artistic tastes, but long rows of jerry-built ugliness were nowhere visible, and the countryside retained the sweet rusticity of a purely rural district.

The Beeches was a fine old mansion standing far back in its own grounds, and surrounded by a number of large old trees, which gave the house its name. Once inside the lodge gates, it was difficult to believe that London, with its surging life, lay in the near distance. An atmosphere of restfulness and repose reigned, only disturbed by the passing of the trains, which ran a little more than a mile away from John Castlemaine's house.

While Radford Leicester was passing along the quiet road he took no notice of his surroundings, but once inside the lodge gates he seemed to realise where he was. He had been to the house twice before, but he had not noticed the grounds. Indeed, he had had no opportunity. Night had fallen before he came, and as he had left at midnight, it was impossible to see anything. Now, however, all was different. It was true the time was late autumn, and many of the trees were denuded of leaves ; but the sun shone brilliantly, and the autumn flowers gleamed in the sunlight. He noticed, too, the air of stately repose which characterised the house ; he was impressed by the extensive lawns, and the gnarled old trees which dotted the park. Here was no tawdry, ornamented dwelling of the *nouveau riche* ; it was the solid, substantial dwelling of a City merchant of the old school. Even the servants had an air of proprietorship. They were not of the "month on trial" order. Evidently they had served the family for many years, and had become accustomed to their surroundings.

Leicester had noticed, when he told the cabman to drive to The Beeches, that the man had treated him with marked respect. Visitors of John Castlemaine were not to be regarded lightly.

"Will you wait a minute," said Leicester to the cabman, as he drew up at the door. He was not sure whether the one he had come to see might be disposed to see him. He rang the bell, realising that his heart was beating faster than was its wont.

"Is Mr. Castlemaine at home?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Perhaps Miss Castlemaine is in?"

"Yes, sir."

The servant recognised him again, and took his card in to Olive with a smile.

"Will you walk in, sir?" he said presently, and then Leicester, having dismissed the cabman, entered the house for the third time.

Everything was strangely quiet. The house might have been in the heart of the country. To the young man it felt almost like a temple, so different was it from the gaily decorated club where he spent so much of his time. When the servant left him, and he looked around the room into which he had been shown, he felt like a man in a dream. It seemed to him as though he had entered a new world. The air of refinement and culture which he had realised when he first entered this room seemed more than ever present. Then a great pain shot through his heart. Why was he there? What had led to his being there?

He heard a rustle of garments outside, and Olive Castlemaine entered. He felt as though this was the first time he had seen her at home. Evidently she

had expected no visitors, and she was dressed for no function. He noticed that she looked younger now than when he had seen her on other occasions, more girlish, more than ever a child of nature. He preferred to see her in this way. It had always seemed to him that women appeared at their worst in the attire which society demands for evening functions. It gave the impression of artificiality, of being dressed for "show." But now all was different. She stood before him in a simple, closely fitting dress, which perfectly harmonised with her glossy dark brown hair and perfect complexion, and also revealed to advantage her finely moulded form.

"I make no apology for taking a great liberty, Miss Castlemaine," he said. "I have called this afternoon on the chance of seeing you, because I could do no other."

She gave him a quick glance; but quick as it was, it revealed the fact that Leicester's mocking, cynical manner was gone. The flash of his eyes, the stern, set features showed that he was deadly in earnest.

"You frighten me," she said, with a laugh. "I hope you have brought me no bad news."

"I have not the slightest idea how you will regard it," he said, "but I have come to ask you a favour."

"What is it?" she said, still smiling. "Is it to give a subscription to some charity which you have been in the habit of condemning?"

"No," he replied, "I have come to ask you to listen to me patiently for a few minutes."

She froze somewhat at this. Perhaps the look in his eyes made her feel somewhat uncomfortable. She realised that it was somewhat unusual for a comparative stranger to come in such a way.

"I am afraid I am a poor listener," she said, "and, what is more, I am at a loss to conceive how I can advantage you by doing so."

"Still, you will hear me out, won't you?"

"I have no choice, have I?" she said, almost nervously.

"I want to be frankly egotistic," he said. "I want to speak about a worthless subject—myself."

She felt her heart fluttering; but she spoke composedly.

"Then I think we had better sit down," she said.

She suited the action to the word, but Leicester continued standing. He laid his hat and gloves on a chair, but stood before her, his body almost rigid.

"I have seldom been earnest during the last few years," he said, "but when I have been, I have always wanted to stand up. I am in earnest now."

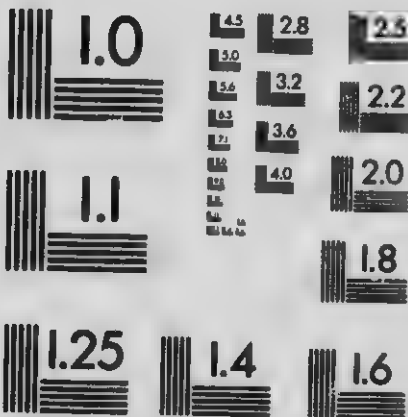
Olive Castlemaine did not reply, but she sat watching him. There was no longer a tone of mockery in his voice, and his pale face and earnest eyes gave no suggestion of the cynical faithlessness which characterised him at their first meeting. She felt as though she would like to refuse to listen to him, but his presence forbade her. He was strong and masterful, even in his appeal.

"Miss Castlemaine," he said, "I imagine that you have heard but little that is good of me. You have been told that I am an atheist, a man without faith in man, or in God, and what you have heard is in the main true. Not altogether, but in the main. I am not what is called a good man, indeed I cannot claim to have been even an admirer of goodness. Certainly I have believed in very little of it."



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Olive interrupted him. "As a strong Protestant, Mr. Leicester," she said, "I am not a believer in confessions, and I am sure I am not fitted to be your confidante."

"You promised to listen to me, Miss Castlemaine," he said, "and I claim the fulfilment of the promise. Believe me, I did not come here lightly, neither am I speaking meaningless words. This afternoon will be a crisis in my life, and if there is a God, He knows that I am as sincere as a man can be."

Again she was silenced. The strength of the man's personality was, although she did not know it, bending her will to his. On the other hand, she was exercising no power of resistance, and she was interested to know what he would say.

"I do not know that I am an atheist," he said. "Indeed, I have sometimes a feeling at the back of my mind that there must be a God, and that this life is only a fragment of life as a whole; but that is not often. That is no wonder. I was brought up to believe that there was no God. I was trained to distrust every one, and to look for evil motives in every life. I believe my father meant to be kind in doing this for me; anyhow, I am a result, at least in part, of his training. I never knew a mother's care."

"Please do not misunderstand me; I am not growing maudlin nor sentimental; I am simply stating facts. I went to Oxford, and while there, my father's training was confirmed, accentuated. I suppose I had abilities, and was informed when I took my degree that my career there was—well, more than creditable. I did the usual thing when I was three or four and twenty. I fell in love."

"Really, Mr. Leicester," said Olive, "there can be no——"

"It was the fancy of a boy," went on Radford, as if he had not heard her, "and it did not last long. She jilted me in a very ordinary fashion, and my heart-wounds were not deep. All it did, I think, was to confirm my early impressions about woman's love. Since that time I have avoided women. Yes, I speak quite sincerely, I have avoided them. Despising them, I neglected seeking the society of women altogether. I have lived mainly at my club, so that I might not be brought into contact with them. You will naturally ask, if you are interested in me at all, what I have lived for. I quite realise that every man must have some motive power in life, some driving-force, and I have had mine. It is very poor, very mean in your eyes, no doubt; but I will tell the truth. My driving-power has been ambition. Rightly or wrongly, many who know me believe I have gifts above the ordinary; they have told me that if I will, I can have a notable parliamentary career. Possibly they are right—I do not know. But I realise, even in spite of my creed, that the motive is insufficient. Besides, I cannot help laughing at the whole political world. The great bulk of our political magnates have no sense of humour, but they are irresistibly funny nevertheless. I can see that they are only pawns in the game, although they think they are of great importance, and then——"

He stopped, and took two or three steps towards the window; then he returned and, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, went on speaking.

"I have been wondering during the last few weeks whether I have not been blind to a very real world,"

he said. "This I know : I have been simply longing to believe in things the existence of which I have denied. I have wanted to believe in a final Will, a final Beneficence ; I have wanted to believe that we are not the playthings of a blind chance, and that what we call disorder and discord are but the preludes to a divine Harmony. With that longing has come another and this is a selfish longing. It is to play something like a worthy part on the stage of life. Sometimes this longing scarcely exists ; sometimes it grows strong and clamorous. There are times when I believe that I, even I, can live a life that is really worth the living. This belief is only a new-born child. It is sickly, and lacks vitality, but it exists.

"No, no, bear with me a few minutes longer. I know I have chosen a poor subject to talk about, but then I confess myself to be an egotist. I, like every other man, regard myself as the only person worth talking about ; so please forgive me. But do not mistake me. I do not pose as a good man, or a worthy man. I still doubt whether such exists ; but there are times when I have strange longings, and these longings sometimes, though rarely, become a kind of belief that I, worthless, faithless as I am, can live a life which is worth the living."

He was silent a few seconds, and seemed at a loss how to proceed, while Olive Castlemaine sat, scarcely realising the true condition of affairs, at the same time feeling the masterfulness of the man who spoke to her.

"Perhaps you are hardly interested to know the reason for this," he went on, "nevertheless I must tell you. You are the reason."

Olive glanced up like one startled.

"I, Mr. Leicester?"

"You. I have not learnt to believe in goodness generally, but I believe in your goodness. I have not learnt to believe in women, but I believe in a woman. I believe in you. And I believe in you because I love you."

He spoke quietly, and there was no tremor in his voice, but his face was, if possible, paler than usual. That he was deadly in earnest no one could doubt.

"I make no pretences," he went on. "I do not say, nay, I do not think that I shall ever become a pattern man. Even now I have no strong faith, even if I have any, in either God or man; but I love you!"

He seemed to be carried away by his own confession. Almost rudely he turned his back on her and walked to the window and looked out over the stretch of lawn and park-land. But he did not remain there. When he came back again Olive glanced at him almost fearfully, and for a moment was well-nigh repelled by the fierce look in his eyes.

"I love you," he went on, still quietly; but his voice had changed. There was an intensity in its tones which she had never heard before. "I love you so, that—that with you by my side, I feel I could conquer anything, accomplish anything—anything! Look at me, yes, like that. Now then, do you love me?"

Almost mechanically she shook her head. She did not know why she did this, only it seemed as if some unseen monitor compelled her.

Radford Leicester took a step towards her.

"You must," he said, in the same low tone, but still almost fiercely, "you must, you must! You must not

withhold it. Good God ! you do not know what this hour means to me. My life, my future, my faith, my all is in your hands."

Still she remained silent. Her face had become pale, and although the look in her eyes was not of fear, it showed no confidence.

"Speak to me," he went on. "I am not a boy longing for a new toy. I am a hardened man, a hardened sinner, if you like. I make no boasts, no professions, but I love you, love you ! and you must love me, you must."

For a moment the girl resented his air of masterfulness. She was not of the weak and pliable kind of women that could be carried away by wild assault. She looked up at him steadily now, and Leicester saw by the expression in her eyes that he had touched a wrong chord.

"Forgive me my rudeness," he said, before she had a chance to speak, "but I think a man in earnest is sure to be rude ; he must be. Do not think, moreover, that I do not realise the value of what I am asking for. I do. I know that you have been sought after on all hands. I know that you are said to be rich, and that you can choose where you will. Oh, yes ; I have thought of all that, and I have realised my madness in coming to you ; but I am a desperate man. No, no, do not think I have been simply attracted by a beautiful face. I have been seeing beautiful faces any time these last ten years ; it's not that. It's you, you. I love you, I tell you, and if you cannot love me I shall go into a blacker hell than I have yet known, and I shall go there with eagerness, and eagerness born of despair. But with your love I can do anything

Oh, I am not boasting, and I am not speaking before looking down to the very depths, but with your love I can live a life worth the living ; I can make a position worth the making. Tell me, Olive Castlemaine, tell me that you can give a thought, a kind thought, a loving thought to me."

In spite of herself she was moved. Olive Castlemaine admired strong, masterful men. She could forgive rudeness where there was sincerity and strength, and certainly she had never been wooed in this way before. She could not help comparing Leicester with men like Purvis and Sprague. They were weak and effeminate beside him. His very cynicism, his faithlessness seemed to her but as an expression of a strong nature, which was dissatisfied with conventions and a weak assent to commonly accepted beliefs. It is true she had seen his weakness, she had heard him express the purposelessness of his life ; but she had also seen in him another Radford Leicester which was great and strong. And yet he had not won her. Something, she knew not what, told her to refuse. An indefinable fear, perhaps owing to her Puritan training and her healthy upbringing, kept her from uttering the words he longed to hear.

Still Radford Leicester had caused her heart to beat as it had never beaten before ; never had she been drawn by such an admiration, an admiration akin to affection, as she was drawn now. He was a strong man, and she instinctively felt that in him were the possibilities of greatness and of goodness. She believed, too, that she could be the means of translating those possibilities into actual life ; but she did not give him a ray of hope. A few minutes before, she felt like

speaking. Now the desire had gone. She had nothing to say, she knew not why.

"You are thinking of what you have heard about me," he said, "are you not?"

"Perhaps."

He was silent for a moment. Perhaps it was because he thought of the night which led to this meeting, and as a consequence felt ashamed. Once, on his way thither, he had thought of telling her the whole story, but now he would rather have suffered death than that she should know. Even then he determined that if either of the men who were parties to the shameful compact, should divulge the secret he would make their lives a hell. For Radford Leicester was not making love to gain a wager. A passion to which he had hitherto been a stranger had gripped him body and soul. At that moment Olive Castlemaine was everything to him. He would have bartered his immortal soul to gain her love. The cold, cynical crust of the man's nature had been broken, and the hot lava which had been lying beneath now burst forth.

"And you care for that," he said.

"Yes, I care for that."

"And if I had been what you call a good man, what then?"

"I do not know."

"But it would influence you?"

"It would influence me greatly."

"You believe in all you have heard?"

"You have denied nothing—and no, Mr. Leicester, even if I loved a bad man, I would crush that love—that is, as you have been speaking of it."

He called to mind what he had said to Sprague and

Purvis on the night the compact was made, and while there was a feeling of joy in his heart at her words, the memory of that night pierced him like a poisoned arrow. This woman had disproved his creed by a single sentence. For he knew that she meant it. There was no weak, faltering hesitancy in her words. The flash of her eyes, the tone of her voice, told him that she had uttered no idle threat. Here was a nature as strong as his own, a nature which loved goodness as much as he had pretended to despise it.

He felt that the ground was slipping under his feet, but he retained his calm.

"Wait a moment," he said, "there is something else I want to say to you."

CHAPTER VII

A WOMAN'S HEART

IF a few months before any one had told Radford Leicester that in order to gain a woman's good opinion he would excuse his own mode of life, he would have either grown angry or laughed that man to scorn. Yet he contemplated doing it at that moment. Perhaps if Sprague or Purvis had been in the room at that moment, they would not have been sure whether he were in earnest, or whether he were playing a part in order to win his wager. For they believed him to be capable of anything. But Leicester was not playing a part. He felt that nothing was too much, that no sacrifice was too great to win the woman who stood before him. And yet in his sacrifice he would not appear to humble himself, for he was a proud man.

"In the past I have not taken the trouble to contradict idle gossip," he said. "I did not think it worth while. Besides, I did not mind what people believed about me. But I have the right to tell you the truth."

"Really, Mr. Leicester, there is no need, and I do not wish to hear confessions."

"But I have the right."

"What right?"

"The right of a man whose future is in your hands, the right of a man whom you can send to heaven or to hell," he replied. "Oh, I am not speaking idle words. Forgive me if I seem to boast. I am no dandy who has made love a dozen times, and to whom a refusal means nothing but what a bottle of wine or a trip to the Continent can atone for. Whether your answer is yes or no, means everything to me. For you must become my wife, I tell you you *must!*"

The girl's eyes flashed refusal, even while they did not lack in admiration. No woman respects a man the less because he will not contemplate refusal.

"Listen, then," he went on. "You have heard all sorts of things about me. I am an atheist, I am a drunkard, I am a cynic, and I laugh at the standards of Mrs. Grundy. Yes, you have heard all that."

"And I have no right to interfere with your mode of life," she said, "only, Mr. Leicester——"

"Wait a moment before you say what is on your lips," he interrupted. "In this case it is for me to speak, and you can do no other than listen."

"Why?" she asked, almost angrily.

"Your sense of what is fair and honourable forbids you," he said. "Yes, I may be what is commonly reported, but there is another side even to that. Let me tell you, then, that I, who never professed to believe in what is called truth and honour, never willingly deceived any man, either by word or by deed. Yes, let me do myself justice. I, who have laughed at Mrs. Grundy and all her ways, never broke a promise made. And more, no man can

accuse me of sullyng either the honour of man or woman. I may be all that is said of me, but I am not that kind of man."

Something, not only in his words, but in his manner, appealed to her. In spite of herself, she gave him a quick, searching glance. There was something noble in his face, there was a healthy anger in his words. Whatever his creed might be, he was not a bad man.

"I had the right to tell you so much," he went on; "that at least was my privilege, and now, having told you, I must tell you something else. You may refuse me once, you may refuse me twice; but in the end you will have to accept me."

Again there was a gleam of anger in her eyes, and he saw the look of scorn which rested on her face.

"I will tell you why. You cannot run the risk of sending a man to hell. With you as my wife I can do anything. Oh yes, I know my words seem like the words of a mountebank, but even my worst enemies have never accused me of being a boaster, and I repeat it; no guardian angel which your story-books tell about could do for a man what you could do for me. I could work, I could think, I could even become great and good. But without you—even the thought of it is like looking into hell."

"And I," said Olive, "could have but little faith in a man who dared not stand alone. If a man's future, his character, his career, are dependent on a woman, then he rests upon a weak reed. A man to be strong must rest on God."

"That may be your theory; if it is, I know that human nature is always laughing at you. If God is,



"With you for my wife, I can do anything."

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He's giving you the opportunity of making a man of me."

"I would try and help you," said Olive, "but what you ask is my love, and love cannot be given for the asking. It can only be given as it comes. In such a matter we are not free agents."

"And could you not love me? Answer me honestly, could you not love me?"

This was the first sign of Leicester's advantage. Her eyes dropped, and the colour came to her cheeks.

Leicester's heart beat aloud for joy; he could not repress a cry of exultation.

But Olive Castlemaine mastered herself by a strong effort of will.

"You ask me to speak to you honestly," she said "Well, I will. I could never love a man—that is as you would be loved—if I did not respect him and I could not respect a man who was the slave to an evil habit."

"You mean——" he hesitated, and looked on the floor.

"Yes, I mean that."

"Look here," he said eagerly, "promise that you will be my wife, and I will never taste a drop of alcohol of any sort again. I give you my word for that. Neither wine, nor whisky, nor spirits of any sort shall ever again pass my lips."

Again she looked at him eagerly, and he thought he saw her eyes soften.

"I mean it," he went on. "What I want is motive power; given that, I can conquer anything. Well, I will do this; say yes, and from this time forward I will never touch it again—never, never!"

"If a thing is an evil, if it is a wrong," she said, "a man should fight it because it is wrong. If a habit has mastered you, you should fight it, and conquer it—because of your respect of—your own manhood."

"You ask too much," he said. "No man can do and be without a sufficient motive. Take you out of my life, and what motive have I?"

"The belief in your own manhood."

"Why should I believe in that? If you refuse me, what have I to live for? Yes, I fight for a position which at heart I despise. I become a member of the British Parliament; many who have not the brains of a rabbit, nor the ideals of a low tavern-keeper, occupy that position. Faith in God and man! I can only think of them through you."

She felt the unworthiness of his position. She knew that her ideal man must always be strong and brave, whatever the circumstances of his life might be, and, so far, Leicester had disappointed her. Nevertheless, there was in his words a subtle flattery which appeals to every woman. She was, humanly speaking, the saving power of his life. The destiny of this strong man was in her hands. What might he not do and be if he were inspired by great hopes and lofty ambitions? His name could be a household word in the land. Millions of struggling, starving people would have cause to bless his name. And she, she could be the means used by God whereby all that was best and noblest in this man could be realised. For she, like all who knew him, felt the wondrous possibilities of his life. It might seem like boasting when he said that with her by his side he could do anything, but she felt sure it was true.

Besides, Leicester appealed to her woman's pride. Every woman longs for strength, masterfulness in the man she loves; she would rather be mastered by a strong man, than be master of a weak man. At that moment she forgot Leicester's cynicism, his professed scorn for all she held most dear; she thought of him as the man he could be.

Behind all that was unworthy, the real man lay strong and brave. He might become a Cabinet Minister, Prime Minister! He had power which could fit him even for this. The sphere of such a man's influence was simply boundless. He could uplift the whole tone of the nation. And then, more than all, he loved her! This was not the sneering, unbelieving man who first came to her father's house a few weeks before, who took a pleasure in laughing at all that was best and truest. No one could accuse him of lack of earnestness to-day. He had almost frightened her by the intensity of his appeal, the passion of his words. And did she love him? If perfect love casteth out fear, she did not love him. Nevertheless, no man had ever appealed to her like this man. Others had asked her for her love, and she had refused them without hesitation; but Leicester was different. If she refused him, it would be after many questions, it would be with an aching heart.

And yet she was afraid. She wanted to think, she wanted to examine her own heart in loneliness and in silence. Yes, and she wanted to speak to her father. Was this a sign that she did not really love him? It was difficult to say. Leicester had been spoken of in her hearing as one who sneered at all things which to her were sacred, and it was out of harmony with her

whole life-thought to link her life with such a man. But there was another side of the question. He loved her, and the thought of his love made her heart beat quickly, and filled her with a strange joy.

These thoughts passed through her mind in a flash. Nay, perhaps she did not think them at all. They became a kind of consciousness to her, a series of impressions which possessed her being without mental activity on her own part. Moreover, Leicester, by a kind of intuition, divined what was in her mind. For these two natures were closely akin, although their training, outlook, and conceptions of life were entirely different. If he were a keen-brained, strong, masterful man, she was in her degree his equal. She loved strength even as he rejoiced in it. Although in many respects presenting a strong contrast, Mother Nature had cast them in a similar mould.

Meanwhile, Leicester was watching her closely. He tried to read her face as he would read an open book, with what eagerness we need scarcely say. What had begun in grim and almost repelling jest had resulted in terrible earnestness. This man loved with all the strength of his nature.

"I want your answer," he said at length. "And I must only have one answer. Oh, forgive me if I seem rude, but I cannot help it. I know that I have not spoken as I ought: that is because I have spoken as I was compelled. I know how unworthy I am—yes, I am in deadly earnest. I know I am not worthy to brush your boots; but I love you with all the strength of my life. Tell me, Olive Castlemaine, that I may hope."

"No," she said quietly, "I cannot tell you that—that is—yet."

She knew she yielded the whole position in that qualification, although she would not have admitted it—so strange a thing is a woman's heart. Leicester felt sure of it too, and, unbeliever as he was, he could have said "Thank God."

"I must have time to think," she went on. "I must speak to my father."

He took a step forward as if to grasp her hand, but she drew back.

"No," she said. "I did not expect—that—you would come to me in this way, and—it is not a decision which can be made lightly."

"No, great God, no," said Leicester. His voice was hoarse, and almost trembling. He never could have believed that he could have been so much moved. "It is everything to me—everything."

In his heart of hearts he believed that she would accept him, and yet the fear that she should not became a ghastly nightmare.

"Excuse me," she went on, "but I think I would like to be alone now. I want——"

"Yes," interrupted Leicester, taking his hat and gloves. "I understand. Good-afternoon."

She felt almost disappointed. Was he going away like this? Did he take it for granted that she would write him her decision? But she said nothing. A servant came in answer to her ring, and Leicester walked into the hall. To the servant his manners seemed that of a visitor who had been coldly received.

"Shall I call a carriage, sir?"

"No, I shall walk to the station."

The man opened the door, and he left the house without another word. He walked to the station

almost like a man in a dream ; he could hardly realise that what had taken place was an actual fact. He had proposed to Olive Castlemaine, and he had not been refused. He found he had twenty minutes to wait for a train back to London, but that did not trouble him. Nothing mattered now. A new element had come into his life ; everything had changed. He was no longer a chip upon life's sea, he was a man who loved, and was loved. True, Olive had not said so much as this, but he had read enough of her character to know that had there not been strong hope for him, she would have refused him there and then.

He walked up and down the platform without seeing or hearing anything. One thought filled his mind, one hope filled his heart. Presently, when his train arrived, he had a vague idea that he was on the way to the City.

An hour later he arrived at his club. By this time the spell which the interview with Olive had cast over him had lost some of its power. Doubts began to arise, fears came into his heart. He was no longer sure of himself or of her. As the excitement passed away, the old longing for whisky came back to him. He was on the point of ordering it when he remembered what he had said to Olive.

"She has not yet promised you," said temptation. "Indulge freely while you may. You will be breaking no promise." He stretched out his hand to ring a bell, but as quickly withdrew it.

"No," he said, "I should be ashamed to meet her again if I did. I'll not be such a weak thing as that."

He scarcely slept that night. Hope and fear, joy and despair alternately possessed him, and in his

darker hours the craving for drink dogged him. Once he went so far as to take a bottle of whisky from a cupboard, but when he realised what he was doing he opened the window and poured the contents into the street. Never in his whole life had a night seemed so long. Again and again did he switch on the electric light and try to read, only to throw one book after another from him in anger and weariness. When morning at length came, it brought no comfort. What had given him hope and joy the day before only filled his mind with doubt now. Besides, every fibre of his drink-sodden nature cried out for satisfaction. Life became almost unbearable.

"It's this uncertainty," he said. "If she had said yes, I could drive the craving from me as such an accursed thing should be driven, but while I am in doubt I seem like a feather in the wind."

As the thought passed through his mind, the humour of the situation possessed him. He laughed at himself. He, Radford Leicester, who for years had despised women, was now admitting that his whole future depended on the single word of one of the despised sex. What would his acquaintances say? This reminded him of Purvis and Sprague, and of the compact they had made, and then he felt like laughing no more. What if they should ever divulge what had taken place between them!

He seized a telegraph form, and wrote quickly: "*Expect me to-night at six. Leicester.*" This dispatch he addressed to Olive Castlemaine, and after that he became more calm. It seemed to form another link between him and the woman he loved. He spent the morning in answering letters which had come from

his constituency, and then, after lunch, he went to a livery stable and hired a horse. When he returned he hardly knew where he had been, but the owner of the horse knew he had been ridden hard, so hard that he resolved to make certain stipulations before trusting him again with such a valuable animal.

A few minutes before six Radford Leicester was again at The Beeches.

"Mr. Castlemaine is expecting you, sir," said the servant, as he took his hat and coat; "he will be down in a few minutes. Will you step this way, sir?"

It was the same room. He noted the chair where Olive had sat the day before, he remembered the quiet ticking clock on the mantelpiece, the fire-irons that were placed on the hearth. He recalled the words of the servant, "Mr. Castlemaine is expecting you, sir." Did that mean that Olive had deputed her father to speak for her? If so, it meant refusal. His heart grew cold at the thought. The door opened and Olive entered. Eagerly he looked at her, feverishly he tried to read her answer in her eyes.

She came up close to him, and then stood still. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Olive?" he said. Everything he meant seemed to be in her name as he uttered it. It was a question, it was an expression of his love, of his heart's longings.

"Yes," she replied.

He lifted her hand reverently to his lips and kissed it. He longed to take her in his arms, and to tell her of his heart's joy; he longed to kiss her lips, and tell her that he would give his whole life to make himself worthy of her trust. But something sealed his lips. What was it?

Is there, humanly speaking, a diviner power on earth than the love of a pure, womanly woman? Is there anything that can make a bad man ashamed of his badness, or lead a purposeless man to devote his life to some great and worthy cause, so really and truly as the love of a woman whom he knows to be worthy of the name of woman? If there is, I do not know of it. If the old, old story that sin came upon the race by a woman is true, it is more true that good women are God's greatest means of purifying the world of its sin. Radford Leicester had not been a good man. If he had not fallen as low as some, it was because of innate pride, and because his nature abhorred some of the grosser and coarser forms of sin. He had not been filled with high purposes, he had lived wholly for self; but as he kissed Olive's hand, such a contrition, such a shame as he had never known before, came into his heart. Proud man as he was, he found himself saying what he would have laughed to scorn a few months before.

"Thank you, Olive," he said, still holding her hand, "you have given me a new life to live." He hesitated a moment, and then went on speaking again. "I want to tell you this," he said. "Although I am unworthy of you, I will try and make myself worthy. That promise I made yesterday I will keep. Yes, I will keep it. And—and if there is a God, I will find Him."

He spoke the words reverently. There was not a touch of the cynic in his voice; it was even as he felt. God had used this woman to lead him the first step towards his salvation.

"You have no doubt, no fear, Olive?" he said.

"No," she said quietly, "not one. I believe you, I trust you implicitly."

"And you love me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Really and truly. You know what I mean?"

He spoke quietly and slowly, but his voice trembled.

"How could I say what I have said—else?" There was a sob in her voice as she spoke, and yet the sob sounded like a laugh.

"Thank God!"

He did not believe, this man, that God existed, and yet it was the only way that he could express the great joy of his heart. Never, until then, had he known what happiness meant. The old, hopeless, purposeless past was forgotten; that night his history began anew.

* * * * *

After dinner that night, John Castlemaine and Radford Leicester talked long and earnestly. It was no light matter to the father to promise his child in marriage; moreover, although he admired Leicester, and while he believed that a great career was possible to him, he did not feel quite happy. For John Castlemaine belonged to the old school of thought, and he had no sympathy with the modern looseness of ideas. He came of a stock who for more than a hundred years had fought the battle of religious liberty, and who had been ready to sacrifice their goods, even their lives, for principle. He was a Puritan of the best order. He retained all their old strong characteristics, he stood for their noblest ideals, without adhering to much that was sunless and repugnant. He was a happy, genial man, kind almost to indulgence as far as

his daughter went, but he was strong in his hatred of the so-called morals of that class to which Leicester was supposed to belong. Moreover, Olive was his only child. Upon her he had poured the wealth of his affection, and thus the thought of giving her to a man was no light matter. Could he then give her to Leicester? It was a hard struggle; but in the end Leicester won. He spoke to John Castlemaine freely and frankly, and he spoke with such fervour, such strength of purpose, that in spite of all he had heard, John Castlemaine was convinced of the other's worthiness.

"But not yet, not yet," said the older man. "I cannot bear to lose her yet."

"But why need we wait?" asked Leicester. "We are neither of us children, and I need her, Mr. Castlemaine. She is all the world to me."

"I say 'not yet,' because without her I shall be alone. Fancy me living in this great house without Olive. It will become like a vault, an empty vault, and I do not know how I can bear it."

"I am free to live where you like," said the young man. "I will build a house close by here if it is your will, or I will buy one. I saw one for sale on my way here."

"Then why not live here?" asked John Castlemaine. The thought of having his son-in-law always near him was pleasant.

"If Olive is willing, I will gladly consent," he replied, "and in that case you will not insist on a long engagement."

When Leicester returned to town that night, it seemed as though the air were filled with music; as

though angel forms were all around him. He felt Olive's warm kisses on his lips, while words of love rang in his ears. Again and again he recalled the words she had spoken, when at length her natural reserve had been broken, and the strangeness of the situation had been dispelled. And he had laughed at the joy of lovers, he had scorned a woman's promises! But all that had gone now. At least he thought so. He did not realise that the past could not be buried, and that the Nemesis of every life walks unchecked. How could he? It seemed to him that the very gates of heaven had been opened, and that his love had created a barrier between him and the dark past, so real and so strong that nothing could break it down.

He had no craving for drink that night; he slept like a child, and when at length the grey November day broke, it seemed to him as fair as a May morning.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOUR MEN MEET AGAIN

THE wedding was arranged for an early date. Leicester pleaded for a month's engagement only, and although that month was multiplied by five, he yielded with good grace, specially as he spent a great deal of time at The Beeches. Not that he was idle during those five months. Rather he worked as he had never worked before. He was anxious to prove himself worthy of the woman he loved. To his casual acquaintances he did not seem to alter much. If he was not cynical, he was satirical; he laughed, as of old, at what he called the humour of politics and religion. He professed but little faith in either philanthropy or self-sacrifice. More than once he offended some of his constituents by his remarks about their institutions, which they said were for the good of humanity. All the same, he rose greatly in the estimation of the people as a whole. They recognised something like moral earnestness behind his brilliant speeches, while at every meeting he attended he seemed to strike a deeper, truer note.

Especially was this true at a meeting which Olive attended. She paid a visit to her old friend at Taviton Grange, and during the time she was there a demon-

stration was arranged for in the Public Hall. Olive had never heard Leicester speak in public, and she looked forward to the gathering with great eagerness. There were to be two speeches on the occasion, besides that of the chairman. One was by one of the most important leaders of the Opposition, and the other by Leicester, who was to speak as the accepted candidate. Of course the hall was packed. The ex-Cabinet Minister was spoken of as the ablest speaker in the party, and his name was a household word. Naturally, moreover, the ex-Cabinet Minister had the place of honour. For more than an hour he spoke, leading the thoughts of the people from one point to another, until, as some one remarked, he had covered the whole field of politics, leaving nothing for Leicester to say. Olive Castlemaine, who was naturally keenly interested in the meeting, felt this more than any one. She wanted to hear her lover at his best, and when the circumstances should be of the most favourable nature.

"How can Radford be at his best after the people have been listening to this great man for more than an hour?" she said to herself. "Oh, I wish he would stop!"

He came to an end at length, and the people cheered heartily. His speech was a strong vindication of his own policy, and a stronger condemnation of the doings of the Government. In truth, there seemed nothing more to say. Still Leicester, as the accepted candidate, was called upon to speak, and as he rose the people gave him a great welcome. The air was hot and stifling, the audience had listened attentively for more than an hour to the speaker of the evening, but in a few sentences Leicester led them to forget

their weariness, and to be unconscious of the stifling atmosphere of the hall.

In turning to address the chairman he saw Olive's eyes fixed on him, and he realised that this was the first time they had ever been together on such an occasion. He must prove worthy of her confidence, of her hope, of her love. He had told her that he could do anything with her by his side, and he longed to show her that he had not uttered an empty boast. Besides, his heart thrilled at the thought that she was his promised wife—this, the one woman in all the world to him.

Men said afterwards that the great speech of the ex-Cabinet Minister was only worthy of being called an introduction to the real speech of the evening. Never had Leicester spoken as he spoke that night, for in addition to brilliant epigram, scathing criticism, and searching analysis there was a great moral fervour. For the moment he cast aside his old hopelessness; and his words were glowing with warmth, and convincing because of the ardent sincerity of his own beliefs. The meeting forgot that an ex-Cabinet Minister had been speaking for more than an hour, and remembered only that the present speaker was lifting them into a higher realm of thought, and presently, when he sat down, the audience rose *en masse*, and gave him an ovation.

Directly he went into the ante-room a crowd gathered around him to congratulate him, but he took but little notice of them. Their praise to him was merely words. Even the congratulations of the ex-Cabinet Minister seemed nothing to him: his eyes were keenly scanning the faces of those present, in order to see some one who had not yet spoken. She came presently, and as Leicester saw her, his heart beat with a great joy.

He knew what she thought—it was evident from the look she gave him.

Forgetful of all else he rushed to her side ; he did not speak, but waited anxiously for what she might say.

"I *am* proud," she said in a whisper.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked.

"That is only a suggestion of what I feel," was her reply.

And she spoke the truth. Never did she feel towards him as she did that night. She forgot the impression he had first made upon her, forgot all the stories she had heard about him. She thought only of her pride in him, and the great future which lay before him. And with it all came the consciousness that she had caused the change. She was giving him nobler thoughts of life ; she was making him realise the great powers which had been lying dormant. It was something to be proud of. To be the means of making a possible great man to realise his greatness, and of bringing into life latent powers of which even he had not been conscious.

Visions rose before her mind of what he would be. She had read the history of the career of men like the younger Pitt, of John Bright, of Disraeli, of Gladstone, and she believed that Leicester was equal to the best of them. She saw him the leader of a people, voicing their wants, and interpreting their language ; she saw him a prophet, revealing to the world the deeper meanings of a nation's life. And she was the instrument chosen for his salvation. He had learnt to love her, he had declared that if he was to be anything but a cynic, a scoffer, it must be through her. She was

his inspiration, his lode-star, his hope. For her, and with her by his side, he could do anything.

She believed it now. In her excitement she compared his speech with the brilliant orations of the great leaders. She was sure that Leicester's powers were of the same order as the powers of Macaulay and Burke. And she—*she* was the instrument used by God to make everything possible.

As she walked back to Taviton Grange, her hand resting on his arm, she seemed to be treading on air. Her life seemed enlarged, her purpose in living seemed greater. She was willing to forget herself, to sink her own personality, so that the man she had accepted as her husband might be the man God intended him to be.

John Castlemaine had been at the meeting also, and while not a believer in all his political doctrines, was also carried away by the brilliance of Leicester's speech. He felt proud of his future son-in-law; and he was sure that Olive had done wisely in accepting him as her husband.

So far Leicester had been true to his promise to Olive. He had never touched alcohol since the day he had asked her to be his wife. Sometimes the craving had been terrible, but he had resisted. He had even borne the covert sneers of his acquaintances without retort. What had begun in a grim and unworthy joke had become to him the great motive power of his life.

Indeed, but for one thing, Leicester was supremely happy. He could never think of the compact which led to his introduction to her without shame, and he had a great dread lest in some way it should come to her ears. More than once, after his engagement had become known, he had sought to obtain an interview

with Purvis and Sprague and Winfield; but for a long time the opportunity which he sought did not come, and he was too proud to seek them for the ostensible purpose of speaking to them about it.

One day in February, however, he saw them together. He had come to his club late one night, and found them alone in the smoking-room. He had spent the evening with Olive, and had come back by the last train. As may be imagined, neither Sprague nor Purvis felt very kindly towards him. No man looks kindly on a successful rival. It angered them also when they remembered that it was through their instrumentality that the engagement had come to pass.

They had been talking about Leicester before he came in. Like many others, they did not believe in his sincerity. How could Leicester, the cynic, the scoffer at women, the man who when under the influence of whisky had made a wager that he could win a woman, love the woman he had won? Was it not simply to win his wager that he was playing this part?

"For my own part," said Winfield, "I believe him to be sincere. What begun in a jest has ended in earnest. When he met Miss Castlemaine, he, who for years had avoided women, realised how wrong he had been. He has evidently fallen deeply in love, and I for my part am glad that she accepted him. Leicester will be a fine fellow, and will have a great future. I hear he never touches drink now."

"I do not believe it," said Sprague. "The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots. I believe he is simply playing a game. As for his giving up the drink, yes, that may be possible. I believe Leicester is capable of doing anything where-

by he can have his way. You'll find that at the end he'll wriggle out of it."

"I don't say that," said Purvis. "Why should he? As we know, she will be a great heiress. There must be pots of money, and Leicester means to have the handling of it."

"It ought to be stopped," said Sprague.

"But how can it be stopped?" asked Winfield. "Even if we desired, we cannot hinder them from marrying. I am told that Miss Castlemaine is deeply in love with him."

"All the more reason why she should be told the truth."

"But she can't be. We have promised to hold our tongues, and—well, a promise is a promise."

"Not when given under such circumstances. We have no right to allow a woman to wreck her life. For Leicester will wreck her life."

"Personally I don't believe it," said Winfield. "Leicester is in love, and Leicester in love will be a model husband."

"Leicester in love! He is not capable of knowing what love means. The man who is capable of such a wager is not capable of making such as Miss Castlemaine happy."

"Anyhow, it is not our affair," said Winfield. "Besides, we've promised to hold our tongues, and we can do no other than keep our promise."

"But to ruin such a life as hers because of a mistaken idea of honour—well, isn't that worse than breaking a promise?"

"My own feeling is, let the affair go on," said Purvis. "At any rate, it may do her good."

At this moment Leicester entered the room. Seeing them together he made his way towards them. He was, as we have said, anxious for an opportunity of speaking to these men together.

The months which had elapsed since we first saw Leicester in this room had made a great change in him. Hope gleamed in his eyes, and with that look of hope had come a happier, healthier expression. It is true he often suffered from nervous attacks. Mother Nature will not be abused as he had abused her without exacting a terrible penalty. Still, his change of life was having its effect, and as a consequence the Leicester of a few months before was no longer the man who stood before them now.

"I am glad to meet you chaps," he said, as he came up to them, "and I think myself lucky in finding you all together. I want to speak to you."

Purvis and Sprague exchanged glances, and from the eyes of the latter an evil look shone. He had not forgiven Leicester for the many times he had held him up to ridicule, neither did he forgive him for being successful where he, Sprague, had failed.

"When last we were all together in this club-room," said Leicester, speaking with an effort, for as may be imagined the thoughts in his mind were far from pleasant, "we—well, as you know, a kind of wager was made."

They waited for him to go on.

"As you know," he continued presently; "I—I—have——"

"Won the wager," said Sprague. "That being so, I shall be prepared to give my cheque to—what was it? Guy's Hospital. All the same, I think it is time

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that this farce should cease. It was unworthy of us all, and for my own part I regret having had anything to do with it."

Sprague's tones, rather than his words, angered Leicester. The thought of the woman he loved more than all on earth being associated with a wager maddened him.

"To whom shall I send my cheque, Leicester?" went on Sprague. "Purvis also wants to know. Having fulfilled our part of the business, you will, of course, also finish yours. It reflects no credit upon any of us."

"No," said Leicester, speaking very quietly. "If any cheque is sent, I will send it myself."

"You mean then that all we have heard is false, and that the young lady has refused you."

"What I mean does not affect you, providing I send the cheque," replied Leicester, still speaking quietly.

"Leicester has been converted at a drawing-room meeting, after all," said Sprague, with a sneer. "I hear he has adopted quite a different tone in his speeches. We shall see him addressing mothers' meetings yet."

Still Leicester kept himself under control, although Sprague tried him sorely.

"Come, Leicester," went on Sprague, "if you are converted, you ought to give up this unworthy business; if you are not, then you have no right to ruin a woman's life."

"I think I can mind my own business," said Leicester.

"But the question is, are you converted from the error of your ways? Have you turned moral reformer, temperance lecturer, and the rest of it?"

"And if I have?"

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"Oh, nothing—only I think it ought to be duly reported in the religious papers."

Leicester still kept himself under control, nevertheless Sprague's sneers were telling on him.

"Besides," went on his tormentor, "you've hardly played the game, Leicester. The understanding was that you were to win her as an atheist, hard drinker, and a cynic, whereas you've turned moral reformer. You've been wearing a mask."

"Well, that's not your business."

"I think it is. Anyhow, you admit that this engagement is a grim joke."

"I repeat that that is not your business," said Leicester; "if I send the cheque to the hospital, the matter is done with, as far as you are concerned."

"And you really mean to say that you are a reformed character? I sincerely congratulate you."

"If you mean by that that I believe in your profession or your drawing-room meetings, no. I regard them as I always did."

"Then you have been simply playing a part with Miss Castlemaine?"

"And if I have, what is that to you?"

He was scarcely master of himself now, or he would not have allowed the conversation to drift into such a channel. But the man angered him almost beyond words, all the more so because he was mixed up in the affair, of which he felt ashamed.

"You admit it, then. All this teetotalism, this tone of moral earnestness which you have introduced into your speeches—it's all to win your wager."

"And if it is!" he cried. "Have I ever pretended to believe in any of the whining sentimentality of the

world? Have I not all along insisted that everything is a matter of price!"

He had meant to have said exactly opposite to this when he saw these men, but they had, in spite of himself, aroused him to a kind of unreasoning anger.

"I think Miss Castlemaine ought to know," said Sprague.

"Perhaps you mean to tell her?" he asked.

"I have thought of it, certainly."

"Then let me tell you this, you fellows," he said, "if ever you do, I'll crush you, as I would crush an empty egg-shell. I'll make life a hell for you. I mean it! I have no fear of Winfield. He makes no profession of religion, and therefore will act squarely; but I say this to you two fellows—you, Sprague, and Purvis—if ever Miss Castlemaine hears of it, I know it will come from one of you two. No one else knows of it, and I shall quickly find out which of you two has told her. Well, I tell you this, no lost soul in the hell about which you preach to sinners shall suffer as you shall suffer."

He had taken the wrong line, and he knew it, yet he did not think, at that time, of a way in which he could make them feel what he felt. His pride forbade him telling them that he was really in earnest now, and that he was ashamed of the compact they had made. He did try to bring himself to it; but to go to Sprague and Purvis and to tell them that he really loved Miss Castlemaine, and to ask them to refrain from mentioning what had passed between them, was too much. Had they been men of a different order, he might have done it; but after the way he had regarded them, after he had laughed to scorn their religious

notions, and their professed faith in women, he could not. He would maintain his old character, and he would make them fear to divulge the secret, which had now become the great fear of his life.

For the first time Sprague felt that he had pierced the weak place in Leicester's armour. He knew now that the man who had laughed at him was afraid of him, and he determined to take advantage of the position he held. It would help him to pay off old

"If you will assure us that you are sincere in this new rôle you are playing," said Sprague, "and if you will promise never to touch drink of any sort again, it might be that——"

But Leicester did not allow him to finish the sentence. He rose to his feet in his passion.

"Promise you!" he cried, "Promise *you*!" He laughed bitterly, and scornfully. Then he sat down again, ashamed of himself for having allowed a man like Sprague to anger him so. "You mistake yourself," he said. "A gentleman does not argue with a cabman, or invite his laundress to dinner. You are presuming too far." He hesitated again for a second. "No," he went on, "I shall not promise anything, nor profess anything. I simply tell you that no word of this affair must pass your lips."

Sprague, stung by Leicester's words, was about to retort angrily.

"No, no, wait a minute," said Leicester, who now spoke very quietly. "Look at me for a moment—that's it. Now, you know me. You know that I am not tied down to claptrap morality. And you know this, too, when I say a thing I'll do it, ay, even if I have to

swing for it, I'll do it. Whatever part I play elsewhere, I'm not playing a part now. I am in deadly earnest, and the devil always helps the man who is faithful to him. Well, I say this: if either of you breathe one word concerning that compact of ours—one word, mark you, especially to Miss Castlemaine—then no leper on a leper island shall suffer what you shall suffer, no victim of the Inquisition invented by your religious teachers has ever gone through the torments which you shall go through; no hell that was ever invented shall be as ghastly as the hell I will drag you through."

"You mean she would throw you over if she knew."

"No matter what I mean; but remember this, I am a man of my word, and I am in earnest about this. Winfield I know is safe, he is a gentleman, and he's not a rejected lover; but you others—well, I have said my say."

He left the club as he spoke, while the three men looked at each other wonderingly.

For some time after this nothing happened to disturb the serenity of Leicester's life. Little by little he was mastering the drink craving, while his outlook on life made him more and more cheerful. Olive Castlemaine had indeed wrought a wondrous change. When he was in her presence, at all events, the old Leicester was gone, and a new and happier man had taken his place. It is true Olive was not demonstrative in her affection towards him, but he was content, and as the wedding-day drew near it seemed to him that his happiness could not continue. The sky of his life was too bright, the joy was too great. Especially did he

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feel this on the evening before the day fixed for their wedding. He had come down from town to dinner, and when, after he had smoked a cigar with John Castlemaine, he and Olive were alone, it seemed to him as though his present happiness were a dream, and that he would presently awake to grim and stern realities.

"Why are you so sad, Radford?" asked Olive; "is anything worrying you?"

"Yes, no—I don't know."

She looked at him keenly.

"Something *is* troubling you," she said. "Won't you tell me?"

"Olive," he said, "to-morrow is our wedding-day. I—I want to ask you something. I want you to promise me something."

She looked at him wonderingly, and then waited for him to continue.

CHAPTER IX

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING

"O LIVE," he said presently, "you've heard strange things about me?"

She nodded.

"You've believed them?"

"You have not denied them. But never mind those now. The past is past."

"Is it?" he said moodily. "Sometimes I almost believe it is; but only sometimes. Generally I have a feeling that there is no past; that what we call past keeps rising up against us, and cursing us."

"Radford, you are not well."

"Yes, I am. My trouble is that I am too happy. Oh, I know what I am talking about. I am too happy. To-morrow is our wedding-day. Think of it, to-morrow you are to be my wife, you are to be mine. The wedding is to be early, then in the afternoon we are going to drive to London, and take the train for the Continent. We are going to Florence, to Rome, to Naples, to Capri, to Corsica. We are going away to sunshine, we are going to miss six weeks of dreary weather, and then when we return the spring will be here. Think of it! And I shall have you. You all the time; you, my wife! Is it a wonder that I am too happy?"

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There was a look of pride in the girl's eyes. It rejoiced her to feel that she could so arouse this proud, self-contained man, that she could drive his cynicism from him. She thought of the old Leicester, and the new, and her heart grew warm.

"And yet I am miserable," he went on; "I am haunted with a great fear lest all this can never come to pass."

She laughed almost gaily.

"The wedding dress has been bought," she said, "and even now our minister, Mr. Sackville, is talking with father about the ceremony to-morrow."

"Yes, yes, I know, but if there is no past. If it is resurrected——"

"Let us not talk about it," she said. "I have heard all about it, and—well, I have given you my promise."

"But if I am worse than you thought," he cried; "if you find out something which you cannot forgive. If some one told you that I am a fraud, a lie, a villain?"

"I should still trust you," she said quietly. "You have never told me a lie, have you?"

"No," he said, "I have never told you a lie."

"Then I should laugh at what I heard. You have told me that since your Oxford fiasco, when that girl jilted you, no woman has in any way ever come into your life."

"Yes, I have told you that, and it is true; bad as I may have been since that time, I have never given any woman but you a thought. If there is a God, He knows that my words are true."

Olive Castlemaine laughed merrily.

"Then," she said, "I shall not trouble a little bit about what I hear."

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He looked up into her face, his eyes all afire with the ardour of his love. With her by his side, all things were possible. He was still a cynic with regard to others, but he no more doubted Olive than he doubted the sunlight. She was beyond suspicion, and yet his very faith in her made him fear that the coming day could never fulfil his hopes.

"I am not fit that you should be my wife," he cried. "I know I am not, and yet I would murder the man who tried to take you away from me. Oh, I am in earnest; I would. Why, you don't know what you are to me. You are hope, faith, motive power, heaven."

He started up, and walked away from her as though he were ashamed to stay by her side. But he quickly came back.

"Oh yes, I hate professions of faith," he went on. "I despise repentant sinners. I would a thousand times rather have to do with a good pronounced black-guard than with your whining convert. And yet I know I shall be a good fellow with you as my wife. And I never break my promises. I was never so mean as that. Oh yes, I was whisky-sodden when I knew you first, and I was a plaything to the habit; but since that day—you remember, Olive—I've never touched it, and I never will—no, I never will!"

Olive Castlemaine was a little frightened at the intensity of his words; nevertheless, she was proud of her power over her lover. What woman would not be?

"And yet I am removed from you, Olive. I don't know why, but I feel it. You love me, don't you?"

For answer, she put her hand in his, and looked steadily into his eyes.

"You know, Radford," she said.

"Yes," he said ; "yes, I know ; but not as I love you. No, no, you couldn't. There's not enough in me to love. You are the only woman in the world to me ; I could no more marry another than I could rise from the dead. Could you marry another man ?"

"Of course not," said the girl ; "you know I could not."

"Say that again," he said passionately, "say it again. Tell me that whatever may happen—yes, I repeat it—*whatever* may happen, you'll never marry another."

"Radford, what is the matter with you ?" she cried. His face was as pale as death, and his eyes shone with a strange light.

"Matter with me !" he cried. "It is our wedding-day to-morrow ; just think of it ! I am going to be at the church early, and I am going to wait there till noon, and then you will come, and the minister will read the marriage service, and you will promise to take me for better or for worse, and you will vow to keep to me as long as we both shall live. Yes, I've been reading the marriage service. My God, the wonder of it ! That's why I'm afraid. If I lost you, I should sink into a deeper hell than ever Dante saw in his wild journeyings. No 'thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice,' no bottomless pit full of fire and brimstone could be as terrible as the hell to which I should go if I lost you. That is what is the matter with me. And you promise me, don't you ? *Whatever* may happen, you'll never marry another man ?"

"No," she said, "I will never marry another man !"

"You could not, could you ?" he said, almost plaintively.

"No," she replied, "I could not."

"And to you a promise is sacred, isn't it? You are not like other women, to whom a promise is no more than a garment which is out of the fashion."

"Of course a promise is sacred to me," she replied.

He looked at her with fierce, devouring eyes. He tried to read her very soul.

"Look at me," he said.

She looked at him, and their eyes met, his burning with the light of his passion, yet steady with the strength of the man behind them; hers steady too, and fervent with the love and admiration which filled her heart.

"Say it again."

"Say what again?"

"Say you will never marry another man, whatever may happen."

"I will never marry another man, whatever may happen."

He clasped her to his heart, and rained kisses upon her, and then he laughed.

"I do not fear now," he said, "I am like the man they sing about—'I fear no foe in shining armour bright.' I can face anything. Olive, there is no happier man in the world than I; nay, nor not half so happy. I feel as though I were king of the world. Now let us talk quietly."

He sat down by her side, and looked steadily into the fire. Outside the wind wailed its way across the park, but he did not seem to heed it. The flames from a log of wood in the grate shot up the chimney, and although he seemed to be gazing at them he did not see them.

"It's all so wonderful!" he said.

"What is, Radford?"

"My happiness. I am not worthy of it. Yes, I have been a bad fellow. No, I have not been the wild rake about town, my vices have not run in that direction. But I have been a selfish brute; I've been a fellow without hope, mercy, or faith. I've cared nothing for others. If a man has stood in my way I've shoved him aside. I've seen only the worst in life, and I've acted on what I saw. I was drink-sodden, too. I was a slave to a vile habit. But for the fact that drink made no visible impression upon me, I should have been one of those drunken sots that have to be put to bed every night. I did not believe in God nor man. No, I scorned God, and religion, and morality, and I sold myself to the devil of my own selfishness. Yes, I did, I know it. And yet you love me! You, you, of all women, you!"

"Yes," she replied, and there was an uneasy look in her eyes, "but you have repented, Radford."

"And if I had not?"

"Then," she said, "I would not have promised to marry you."

"You mean that?"

"Yes, I mean that. I could never truly love a man whom I did not respect. And I could not respect such a man as you were, no matter how clever I might think you to be. Even although I might love a bad man, I would never marry him."

He knew she meant what she said, and while it saddened him, it made him rejoice also. Yes, she had driven all his old theories to the winds. Whatever was true with other women, this woman was prompted by true thoughts, inspired by high ideals.

He was silent for a while.

"Yes," he said presently, "and you are right. What you say is right. And I want to believe, Olive; sometimes I do, I do now. And I want to be a good man, yes, a good man. You'll help me, won't you?"

"I'll do all that a woman may, Radford; but only God can make a man truly good."

"It's wonderful, that Christian story," he said.

"And you believe it, don't you, Radford?"

Again he was silent.

"I will not tell a lie even for you, Olive," he said. "Do I believe? Yes, in a way. I believe in its sublime ethics, I believe in Christ—in a way. Oh yes, He was a wonderful man, ay, a Divine man. I believe, too, that He has ennobled the whole thought of the world about God; but for the rest—I don't know. Still, you know what I promised you: if there's a God, I'll find Him. That is all I can say, Olive, except that I'm going to try to be a good man. Faith in man, in human motives? Don't press me too hard, Olive. Are you content?"

There was manifest sincerity in his voice, his eyes were lovelit. What wonder, then, that Olive confessed her contentment, and her happiness?

Shortly before midnight he left The Beeches. For an hour before he said good-night, he seemed to forget all sad thoughts. He talked cheerfully with John Castlemaine, and Mr. Sackville, the minister of the church with which both Olive and her father were associated. All dark clouds seemed to have lifted. In less than twelve hours from that time he and Olive would be man and wife. Before the next day had come to an end, they would be on their way to Italy,

the land of sunshine and song. The future revealed itself to him in glowing colours. He saw himself climbing the hill of fame with Olive by his side. It was almost certain that the General Election would take place in less than two months from that time, and even if it did not, it could not be postponed later than the following autumn. Then he would enter Parliament, and after that his position was assured. Already the ex-Cabinet Minister who had spoken with him at Taviton had told him that he expected great things from him in the House, and had also suggested certain questions to which he should give special attention. Moreover, they were questions in which Olive was deeply interested: housing of the poor, the drink curse, and others of a similar nature.

"These things," said the ex-Cabinet Minister, "are bound to be brought forward. Master them, Leicester, and you will make yourself indispensable to your party."

And so he was happy. Hope shone in his sky, love burned in his heart, while his whole being was filled with great purpose.

Olive accompanied him to the door as he left the house. She had entered into Leicester's spirit of gladness. She rejoiced as she saw how her father admired him, and how keenly he enjoyed his conversation. She noted with gladness, too, that her marriage was not going to cause her father the sorrow she had feared. Rather, he seemed to look forward with pleasure to the prospect of having his clever son-in-law to live with him.

"Until to-morrow, Olive," he said, as he kissed her good-night.

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"Yes, it will not be long."

"No, only a few hours, although it seems an eternity. You are happy, aren't you?"

"Yes, entirely"; and she meant what she said.

"Are you?"

"Happy!" he cried. "Ah, you can't realise how happy! Only until to-morrow, and then there will be no more separation."

There was a new tone of tenderness in his voice, and as he spoke the tears came into her eyes.

"Some day, Radford," she said, "you will know how good God is, you will know the joy of being a Christian."

For answer he kissed her tenderly.

"Good-night, my love," he said, "good-night until to-morrow—my wife."

"Until to-morrow, Radford."

He walked a few steps up the drive; then he turned and saw her standing at the door watching him. He came back to her side again.

"One kiss more—until to-morrow, our wedding-day," he said.

She held up her face to him with a glad laugh. He kissed her again, and then hurried away, not daring to look back a second time.

She had scarcely returned to the drawing-room, when, she knew not why, a feeling of great depression came into her heart. Her sky, which a few seconds before was clear, now hung with great black clouds. Shadowy forebodings came into her mind and heart. She heard her father talking with Mr. Sackville in the smoking-room. They were chatting and laughing pleasantly, and yet the sound of their voices made her almost angry.

A servant entered the room.

"Yes, Masters, what is it?"

"A letter has just come for you, miss."

"By the last post?"

"No, miss, it was brought by hand, only a few minutes ago. I did not like to bring it, till Mr. Leicester had gone, miss."

She took the letter without a word, and went up into her bedroom. Her maid came to her, but she told her she did not need her any more that night; she wanted to be alone. Still holding the letter unopened in her hand, she drew a chair before the fire, and sat back in it, and closed her eyes. Why this strange feeling of depression? Why was she so sick at heart? Radford's kisses were still warm upon her lips, his words still rang in her ears.

Almost mechanically she broke the seal of the letter which had been brought, and glanced carelessly at it. A minute later her eyes became riveted to the paper. As she read, one expression followed another on her face—wonder, indignation, shame, passion, in turn possessed her.

She read the letter a second time, then a third, then a fourth. Her features became set, her eyes became hard, her hands clenched and unclenched themselves as though she had no control over them. She threw the letter from her; but immediately she caught it up again, and then read it for the fifth time. It was a long letter, plainly and legibly written, evidently by an educated person.

After she had read it a fifth time, she sat staring into the fire. She saw nothing, heard nothing. She was oblivious to her surroundings. Her face, even

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her lips, were bloodless. She sat thus for a long time.

Presently she aroused herself, and pulled the bell-cord. A servant-maid appeared.

"Is my father gone to bed?" She did not turn her face towards her, and she spoke with evident difficulty. Her voice was almost toneless.

"No, miss, he is just saying good-night to Mr. Sackville."

"Will you please go to him, and ask him to go into the library."

"Yes, miss."

"Why are you waiting?"

"Shall I tell him that you will come to him, miss?"

"Yes."

The girl left the room, while Olive continued to look into the fire with the same stony stare.

Again she read the letter through. This time slowly, word by word, sentence by sentence, as though she would weigh its meaning carefully and judicially. When she had finished, she had apparently made up her mind. She rose to her feet, and took a step towards the door, but she was unable to proceed further. Her brain whirled, she felt herself falling. Clutching the back of the chair she held herself for a few seconds, then, as if by a sudden effort of will, she controlled herself. Then she walked across the room steadily, opened the door, and went downstairs slowly. Her face, even to her lips, was still ashy pale, and in her eyes was a stern set look. There was no sign of weakness in her movements, and yet she looked as though she had been stunned. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she looked slowly around her, as though

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she were not quite sure of her whereabouts. There was a dazed expression in her eyes, which suggested the look in the eyes of a sleep-walker.

Again she seemed to make a sudden effort, and then she walked to the library door and opened it. John Castlemaine looked up at his daughter's entrance, and was startled by her appearance. He was sitting in an armchair, smoking a last pipe before going to bed.

"Olive, my darling, what is the matter? Are you ill?" he asked tenderly.

She tried to speak, but could not; then she moved towards him, and threw herself into his arms, while John Castlemaine held her, as he had held her years before, when she was a baby.

The next morning Radford Leicester woke early. Contrary to his expectations, no sooner had he placed his head on the pillow the night before than he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. After the excitement of the evening, nature demanded rest, and so she wrapped her kindly arms around him, as if she desired to be specially kind to him just then. When he awoke he could not for a time realise where he was; but the truth soon came to him. He remembered, too, that it was the morning of his wedding-day. His heart gave a leap as the thought came into his mind, and then to stay in bed any longer was an impossibility. He dressed with great care, now and then looking out of the window, and noting with satisfaction the blue of the skies and the sweetness of the air.

"Only a little while longer," he said again and again to himself. "I wonder how she will look as she walks up the church aisle on her father's arm?"

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The wedding arrangements had been discussed several days before, and everything was settled in due order. When Leicester had been asked whom he wished to invite to the wedding, he did not mention a single name.

"No one at all?" John Castlemaine had said.

"No one," replied Leicester. "I have no real friend on earth, neither man nor woman. Yes, I have a lot of acquaintances, but I do not wish them to come to my wedding. My father died five years ago. I can scarcely remember my mother. As for all the rest of the world—no, I do not wish to invite any one."

"But you must so far conform to convention as to have a best man."

"Must I? Very well, now let me think. Yes, Winfield will do. He's about the best chap I know."

He had barely mentioned his name, however, when he would gladly have recalled it. Like lightning the fact flashed into his mind that on the night of the wager it was Winfield who had suggested the name of Olive Castlemaine.

"That's all right," said Mr. Castlemaine. "He's just the fellow. So you will invite no one else?"

"I would rather not invite *him*," said Leicester.

"But you must, Leicester. I must positively insist on that. For my own part, I think I should have liked you to have invited some of your chief supporters in your constituency."

"No, no," said Leicester, "don't ask me; really, I would rather not."

And so, although Leicester did not like the thought of it, Winfield was asked to act as best man, and arrangements had been made for the two to meet that

morning at a station three miles from The Beeches, which happened to be on the line which the young journalist most frequently used.

At the time agreed upon Leicester was there, and found the carriage which he had engaged. Here, too, he found Winfield, and the two drove to the church where the wedding was to take place.

"You must be a happy man," remarked Winfield.

"Yes."

"Everything has gone smoothly, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Of course you were at The Beeches last night?"

"Yes."

"You have a beautiful day for the wedding, too."

"Yes, it seems as though spring were coming early."

"I say, old man, you don't look as happy as you ought, you know."

"Wait till the knot is tied, and there'll not be a happier man in Europe," said Leicester.

Winfield looked at Leicester questioningly, and wondered what he was thinking about. He reflected that he was not a man from whom one could easily obtain confidences, and so held his peace.

"I say," said Leicester, as the carriage drew near the church, "let us pull down these confounded blinds. I don't want to be gaped at by the crowd."

"There's sure to be a crowd?"

"Sure to be. I suppose Mr. Castlemaine has invited nearly two hundred guests. Besides, Miss Castlemaine is so well known that the whole neighbourhood will be at the church doors."

When the carriage drew close to the church, Winfield pulled the curtain aside sufficiently to look out. He

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noticed that the church gates were locked and that there were no signs of a wedding, save that a number of people looked wonderingly and disappointedly at the closed gates, and the closed doors beyond.

"What's the matter?" asked Leicester, who noticed the look on Winfield's face.

"Was everything right last night, Leicester?"

"Everything. Why do you ask?"

"Because—well, look out for yourself and see."

Leicester looked at the church. The front gates were locked, the church doors were locked. A number of people stood around talking.

A strange look came into Leicester's eyes. His heart became like lead.

"Stay where you are, Leicester. You don't want to show yourself to this crowd. I'll get out, and make inquiries."

He leapt out of the carriage, and then closed the door with a bang, while Leicester sat inside.

"Great God, what can it mean?" he said again and again.

CHAPTER X

THE WEDDING-DAY

A FEW minutes later Winfield returned. He entered the carriage without a word. He seemed stunned by what he had heard.

"What is it, Winfield?—tell me."

Winfield looked thoughtful, he seemed at a loss what to do or to say. Then he opened the carriage window.

"Drive on," he said to the coachman.

"Where to, sir?"

"The station," he said; "that is, The Beeches Station."

"Yes, sir."

"I say, what is it, Winfield?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be an ass—tell me."

"It's the general impression that there's to be no wedding to-day," said Winfield grimly.

Leicester seemed prepared for this. He never moved a muscle of his face, but it was evident his mind was working quickly.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"I found the church caretaker, or sexton, or whatever they call him," said Winfield, "and he told me

that he had received orders at eight o'clock this morning to open neither the church gates nor the church doors, as the wedding would not take place to-day."

"I see," said Leicester. "What besides?"

"It seems the talk among these people that the telegraph clerk has had a busy time this morning. It is said that he has sent hundreds of telegrams, all signed 'Castlemaine.' I expect that's a bit exaggerated," he added.

"And the purport of these telegrams?"

"There is a general impression that they all repeated the information which the caretaker gave me. I say, Leicester, have you any explanation to give?"

"I? None. No, I must receive the information. Yes, at least that's due to me."

"Have you received no communication of any sort?"

"I? No, I forgot. I did not ask about my letters this morning. I—I think I was too—excited."

"Drinking?"

"No; but if—I say!" He put his head out of the carriage window. "Not to The Beeches Station," he said; "the house—you understand?"

The driver grinned. Evidently he had heard what had been said, but he said "Yes, sir," quite civilly, and changed the direction of the horses' heads.

Winfield wanted to say more to Leicester, but he dared not, the look on the man's face was too ghastly.

"Here's fine copy for the yellow journalist," thought Winfield. "It seems a pity that this kind of thing is not in my line. It would be more eagerly read than any news about the Armenian atrocities. But

there, there will be enough to give this matter publicity. I wonder what lies at the bottom of it. Of course some plausible excuses will be given to the local reporters—Miss Castlemaine ill, or Mr. Leicester called to Abyssinia ; but there's some tragedy at the back of this, as sure as my name's Arthur Winfield. Poor old Leicester, he looks death-stricken."

The carriage drew up at the door of The Beeches, and Winfield looked out. No one was to be seen. There were no signs that anything of importance had happened, or would happen. It might have been an empty house, for all the signs of life that were visible. As for suggestions of a wedding, they were nowhere apparent. The springtime had not come, but the day was warm, and an air of restfulness seemed to reign over the grounds. The hall door was closed.

Leicester leapt from the carriage, then he looked around in a dazed kind of way. He noted the great beeches in the park, and the passing of a distant train.

"Perhaps Miss Castlemaine is ill," said Winfield, "or it may be that something has happened to her father." He wanted to chase away the ghastly look which rested on the other's face.

But Leicester seemed to take no heed ; rather he appeared to be trying to realise the situation.

"Let me see, Winfield," he said. "I want to understand. Put me right if I am in the wrong. To-day is the day arranged for my wedding-day. Two hundred guests were invited. We were to be married up at the church yonder, by that man Sackville. When we got there we found the place locked, while you were informed that the caretaker had received

orders to keep the place locked, as there was to be no wedding. You were also told that the telegraph clerk had sent away a lot of messages saying the same thing as the man at the church told you. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. But Miss Castlemaine or her father may be ill, you know. You did not look at your letters this morning, and thus were in ignorance."

"I only wanted to be sure I had got hold of the facts," replied Leicester. "I might be mistaken, you know. I feel all knocked about."

He went to the door and rang the bell. After what seemed ages to him, it was opened by an old servant.

"Is Miss Castlemaine at home?"

The man hesitated a second, and then said:

"I believe so, sir."

"Is—is—she well?"

He did not seem to realise what he was saying, and yet he watched the servant's face closely.

"As far as I know of, sir."

"Will you tell her I wish to see her?"

Again the man hesitated.

"Excuse me, sir," he said presently, "but you can't see her."

"Why?" he asked in a dazed way.

"It's not for me to say, sir."

By a strong effort he controlled himself, the old look of determination came back into his eyes, and he spoke more like his normal self.

"Am I to understand that you have her orders to this effect?"

"Yes, sir—that is, from Mr. Castlemaine, sir."

"Will you please go and tell her that I am here, and that I wish to see her?"

There was a tone of command in his voice. The man felt like obeying.

"It's no use, sir," he said; "my orders was most explicit, sir."

A savage look flashed into his eyes, but he held himself under control.

"I wish you to go to Miss Castlemaine and tell her that I must see her."

"My orders, sir, was most——"

"Go and tell her," he said quietly, "that I must see her, and that I shall wait here until I do."

The look in his eyes frightened the old servant. Besides, for some time now, he had been led to look upon him as his future master.

"For God's sake, Mr. Leicester——" he said piteously.

"Go, or I will not be answerable for the consequences," he said, in the same quiet tones; "tell them that I will not take 'No' for an answer."

The servant looked helplessly, first at Leicester and then at Winfield. Finally he closed the door in their faces like one afraid.

"I'll do the best I can, sir," he said, "but you must not come in."

A few minutes later he came back again, and his face was almost as pale as that of the young man who had stood as still as a statue on the doorstep.

"If you please, sir, you are both to follow me," he said in a frightened whisper.

Leicester was perfectly calm now, but the calm was unnatural; his every feature was set and rigid, his face had a pallor that was deathly. He followed the man without a word. As for Winfield, he felt that the

whole atmosphere of the place was charged with excitement, and he wondered why he was also asked to follow the servant.

With faltering steps the man led the way into the library. Leicester knew that this was John Castlemaine's favourite room, and that it was here he spent most of his time when he was at home. The servant opened the door, and then closed it again, noiselessly.

Olive Castlemaine and her father were both standing near the fireplace as the young men entered. The man's face was cold, and stern, and relentless. As for Olive, she gave evidence of a sleepless night. Her eyes were dry and hard, but her face, though pale, suggested no signs of weakness. She looked almost composed, except that her lips were compressed.

Leicester took a step towards but only a step. The look in her eyes forbade him. Still he remained calm.

"I am naturally come for—for an explanation," he said.

"I thought that my letter would have relieved me of that necessity," said John Castlemaine.

"I have received no letter."

"I sent one by hand this morning."

"I have not seen it."

Leicester knew by the look on Olive's face that something terrible had happened, and the look nerved him to expect anything.

"In my letter," said John Castlemaine, "I explained why no wedding could take place to-day, why from henceforth my doors must be closed to you."

"You did not say this last night."

"Much has happened since then."

"Nothing can have happened since then to justify such treatment as I have received."

"Perhaps not," replied John Castlemaine quietly, "but information concerning past events has reached me since last night which will justify any treatment."

Leicester's calm was beginning to leave him.

"Olive," he cried, "surely after what was said last night between us you will not——"

"You will kindly address whatever remarks you wish to make to me," interrupted John Castlemaine. "I do not wish my daughter to have any intercourse with you whatever."

"Then will you give me an explanation of—of this—fiasco," said Leicester. He still spoke quietly, but any one could detect the tone of anger that had come into his voice.

"Nothing in the shape of a fiasco exists," said the older man. "Personally, I do not imagine that any explanation is needed, but, for form's sake, I will make it. You were received into this house as a gentleman. I do not think that any of the servants, to say nothing of myself, have ever regarded you in any other light. I am an old-fashioned man, Mr. Leicester, and when I know that a man has acted as no gentleman could or would act, I simply forbid him my house, and I give my servants instructions accordingly."

"Since when have I ceased to have the right to be treated like a gentleman?" asked Leicester.

"Since I knew that you made my daughter the subject of a wager," replied John Castlemaine, with quiet scorn. "Since you wagered a hundred pounds that you would win her as your wife."

The blow had fallen; the blow which Leicester had

feared. That which had haunted him for months had come to pass. The truth had leaked out, and both Olive Castlemaine and her father knew the worst. He knew it was no use making any denials, or urging any extenuating circumstances. There was enough of truth in the charge to justify Mr. Castlemaine's every word.

"I do not think I need to say more," went on John Castlemaine. "I see that you quite understand. You cannot wonder therefore that I have nullified all arrangements for—what we expected to take place to-day. That is all, I think. There is no need to prolong an interview which, whatever it is to you, is very painful to me."

But Leicester was not to be put off so easily. He felt that it was for him to confess everything, and then fight to the very last. Besides, he felt he had not been treated fairly. At least he should have been allowed to justify his position before having the door closed in his face.

"However much truth there may be in what you say," he said, speaking still quietly, "I think the right of explanation is due to me. Nay more, I think I might have been allowed to answer whatever charges were made against me before—before the church caretaker had his orders."

"I could not see how any man could desire to make explanations," said John Castlemaine. "Personally, I think I should have thought less badly of you if shame had kept you away. The information I have received was so exact, so convincing, so well authenticated, that there was no room for doubt. Your whole behaviour, your every visit has been an insult to my daughter."

"Insult?"

"Insult. I can use no milder term. Still, you mention explanation. If I gave you no chance to make it before annulling arrangements, I give it now. Much against my will, it is true ; but I give it."

The words gave Leicester a ray of light. If this interview was against Mr. Castlemaine's will, then Olive must have influenced him. He turned towards her eagerly.

"You at least will hear me," he said ; "you will understand what your father cannot."

"I think I told you to address your remarks to me," said John Castlemaine coldly ; "my daughter wishes no further intercourse with you."

During their conversation Olive had remained standing by the fireplace, her face rigid, her eyes fixed on the window. Nevertheless, it was evident she had heard all that was said. At her father's words she aroused herself and said :

"No, let him say what he will ; it will be interesting."

Leicester felt the scorn of her words. At that moment he felt that she regarded him as a creature beneath contempt. Still, he was fighting for life, nay, more than life.

"I will admit," he said, "that appearances are against me." Here he hesitated like a man who could not find words to express his thoughts. He looked around almost helplessly, but only silence followed his words.

"Who gave you this—this information ?" he demanded.

"That is no concern of yours or mine at present," she replied, "seeing even you cannot deny the truth of what my father has repeated."

"There—are extenuating circumstances," he stammered.

"Yes, I suppose there were," she said coldly. "You were drunk ; at least I suppose that is the extenuating circumstance to which you refer. While you were in this condition you said that all women were base, and without honour. You said they could be all bought with a price. It seems that my price was the position which you could offer me. Satisfy my ambition, and then I would consent to be the wife of any man who might choose to ask me."

Never until then did he realise the meaning of what he had done. Even in the hours when he had regretted his wager most, he never felt its purport as he felt it then. Her words burnt him like hot iron, but he still spoke quietly.

"You put the case unfairly," he said ; "it has never occurred to me in that light."

"Then give it your own version," she said ; "as I said, it will be interesting."

He tried to speak, but could not. He tried to think of some means whereby he could put the whole sordid business in a more favourable light, but his tongue refused to obey his will. Nothing but the horrible naked truth as she had put it appeared to him.

She looked up at him scornfully.

"You do not answer," she went on in the same quiet, bitter tones. "You admit, then, that I was the subject of a wager, the wager being that you could satisfy my ambition, and that therefore I could be won as your *wife* ! Of course I feel greatly—honoured. Who would not ? I believe that I was suggested by this other—gentleman. Then being

thought a fit subject for a wager, my price being a hundred pounds, you set to work to gain admission to this house. Well, I refuse to be utilised in such a way. That is all, I think. I am sure we need not detain you longer."

"No, no, it is not all," said Leicester. "It is not fair to me that I should make my explanations before—others, but you compel me. I must admit that I did participate in this vile business; but I was not myself that night. I was——"

"Yes, you were drunk," said John Castlemaine; "go on."

"I confessed the truth to you," continued Leicester, still keeping his eyes on Olive. "I told you that this habit had grown upon me; but never since—since that night—you remember—have I tasted a drop. But—yes, and you knew my reputation; concerning those things I never deceived you."

Olive was silent.

"It is true I believed that women were all base, and selfish, and sordid," he went on. "Yes, I did, and I did not hide my views. Then when Purvis and Sprague challenged me I confessed my willingness to put them to the test. I told them to choose the best and noblest woman they knew of, and——"

"They chose me," said Olive. "I am greatly honoured."

"I did not know you then," said Leicester; "my acquaintance with women had made me believe that all of them were what I said."

"And yet you were willing to marry one of them," she said quietly.

"No, I would not," he cried. "I simply wanted to

prove my words. I would never have married such a woman."

"But you would seek to win her, and after you had won her you would discard her. That is even worse than the other."

"Yes, yes," he said bitterly, "I deserve it all, doubtless. Yes, I was intoxicated if you like, and I made a wager that I would win you as my wife. I did not know you, and I believed that you were like all other women. I was told that it was commonly believed that I should have a brilliant career, and I believed that the prospect of being the wife of a successful parliamentarian would be sufficient to gain your consent to being my wife. Yes, I will confess the whole truth. I believed you to be like the rest of the world; but I did not intend to marry you. I intended to gain your consent, and——"

"And then drag my name into another drunken orgie," she said, and her eyes flashed fire. "My name was to be bandied about in the clubs, I was to be mentioned as one who had proved the truth of Mr. Radford Leicester's exalted views, I was to be pointed out as one who was to be won for a wager, and then discarded when the wager was won."

"No," he cried. "Loathsome as was the whole business, it was not so bad as that. We bound ourselves that no word of the affair should leak out, not one word. Only three men knew of it beside myself. You know whom they were, I daresay. Two of them had proposed to you and had been rejected; the other, as you say, was Winfield here. Whatever had happened, no one would have known had they not told. One of the other two has told you, which I do not

know as yet ; but I will know—mind that. Perhaps you will tell me ? ”

Olive was silent.

“ Well, that does not matter. I shall find out, yes, I shall find out, and then——” He laughed bitterly, and any one who had looked into his eyes would have seen murder there. “ But there is another side to this business, bad as it is, and no one feels its loathsomeness more than I. Let me at least have the opportunity of putting the other side.”

For the first time Olive seemed to unbend a little. She did not speak, but she seemed ready, nay, even eager, to hear what he had to say.

“ Let me say this, then,” said Leicester. “ Almost ever since the first time I saw you I have repented of the whole business. It has haunted me night and day. When I came to know you, and to realise how noble and true you were, I scorned, I loathed myself. I would have given anything to have undone what had been done. I dared not tell you, for I feared you would drive me from your presence. No man honours a woman more than I honour you, no man believes in a woman’s nobility and honour more than I believe in yours. As I said, as soon as I saw you I loathed what had taken place, for I loved you.”

“ You mean,” said Olive, “ that you no longer came here because of your desire to win this wager, but——”

“ Because I loved you,” said Leicester eagerly. “ I forgot the presence of Winfield, and John Castlemaine. Only he and Olive were together, the others did not exist. “ Yes, that is true, I came only for you. More than once I was tempted to tell you everything ; but I was a coward—I was afraid. I had learnt that you

were a proud woman, and I felt sure that if I told you, you would drive me from your presence. And I could not bear the thought of it, Olive. You are everything to me, life, hope, heaven! You know you are—yes, you know it. As for the other business, I hated it, as I hated myself when I thought of it. My great desire was to drive it from my mind. Surely you believe this, Olive—you must! Yes, I deserve all you have said—all and more; but now that you know the truth, now that you know what was begun in ghastly farce has ended in terrible reality, now you know that all my life is bound up in you, you only, you will forgive, will you not?"

Olive Castlemaine never took her eyes from him as he spoke, she seemed to be trying to read his inmost thoughts. Once or twice her face softened as he spoke, as though she wanted to yield to his pleading, but when he had finished she hesitated.

"This is true?" she said quietly. "Every word is true, is it not?"

"By all I hold sacred it is true," he cried. "I had not known you a week before I loathed the business, and cast it from me as I would cast a serpent from me. I thought of you only, because I loved you more than ever man loved woman, because the very thought of life was unbearable without you."

"Then there is another question I would ask you," she said.

CHAPTER XI

LEICESTER AND WINFIELD

LEICESTER, whose heart was again beating with hope, took a step nearer to her as she spoke.

"I will answer any question you ask me, Olive," he said; "let everything come to light."

"I wish to know," she said calmly, "if what you say is true, why you told the others that you were only seeking to marry me to prove your wager."

"It is a lie," said Leicester; "I never told them."

"Less than two months ago you told them. After our wedding-day had been fixed you told them. You met them in your club, in the same room where I was first discussed. The two others, and this—gentleman. They besought you to give up this"—Olive hesitated as though the very thought stung her—"this wager. But you insisted on paying the money yourself—this hundred pounds, the price at which I was valued. They urged you, I repeat, and you refused. They asked you whether you had become reformed in your opinions and you denied it. Then they accused you of still playing a part to obtain my consent to marry you, that you might win your wager. And you admitted it."

"That is a lie."

"I happen to remember the words that were used," said Olive, speaking in the same hard, quiet voice. "One of them said to you, it does not matter which, but one of them used these words after you had made certain statements: 'Then you have been simply playing a part with Miss Castlemaine?' and you replied, 'And if I have, what is that to you?' Then this man said, 'You admit it then? All this teetotalism, this tone of moral earnestness which you have introduced into your speeches, it is all to win your wager?' And then you answered, 'And if it is, have I ever pretended to believe in any of the whining sentimentality of the world? Have I not all along insisted that it was a matter of price?' Then these men said I ought to know, whereupon you threatened them with terrible punishment if they dared to tell me. Do you pretend to deny this?"

"I deny everything," said Leicester sullenly. The resurrection of the past, the destruction of his happiness had unhinged his mind. He scarcely knew what he was saying, the ground seemed to be dug from under his feet.

"I wondered whether you were base enough to deny that," she said; "I even hoped that you were not, but after I had learnt what I have learnt I dared not believe. My informant asked me to appeal to Mr. Winfield to verify the truth of this, that was why I told the servant to bring him with you. Mr. Winfield, have I described exactly what took place? Did this man say the words I have repeated?"

Winfield, who had been listening like a man in a dream, felt himself unable to speak. He could not, with Olive's eyes upon him, tell a lie, and say that what

had been told her was false, neither could he, as he saw the deathly pallor on Leicester's face, and the fearful look in his eyes, confess the truth.

"You do not speak, Mr. Winfield," she said; "even you cannot support your friend. Still, if I have misjudged him, it is right that you should tell the truth. Did he, or did he not say these things?"

"I am sure he did not mean them," said Winfield tamely.

"Thank you; now then, go, Mr. Leicester."

Leicester started like a man who had been stung.

"You surely do not mean that," he cried. "No, no, Olive, you cannot mean that."

"The disgrace of being the subject of hundreds of gossiping tongues, as I am at this moment, is nothing to this disgrace of being the subject of a wager among drunken men. Do you think I could ever speak to you again after knowing what I know? Even now I feel contaminated by being in your presence. It is like poison to me. Your every word has been proved to be lies, your protestations worthy of the creed you profess. Go, then, and may God forgive you for the pain you have caused."

But Leicester never moved.

"If I were a man," she said, "I would throw you out of the house; and but for the fact that the servants would talk, I would ring for them at this moment, that you might be treated as such as you deserve. As it is, seeing you have not shame enough to leave such a house as this for the telling, I will leave the room myself."

Leicester lost control of himself. The man's sky

had become as black as night ; all he regarded as worth living for had been destroyed in an hour.

"You shall not go," he cried, "that is, you shall not go until I have explained those words which were uttered in a fit of madness."

"Explain? yes, doubtless you would explain, if I would sully my ears by listening; but I will not. Moreover, see to it that you never dare to cross my path again."

"I dare anything," he cried, "anything, everything. No, you shall not get away from me so easily. Oh, yes, I remember, and you remember, too, the promise which you made last night. You said then, that whatever might happen, you would *never* marry another man. Surely you, with your fine notions, will never break your promise?"

He was beside himself, or he would never have uttered such words. He saw, moreover, that the arrow had gone home; a look of pain shot across her face.

"Oh, yes, I've got you," he went on wildly, "and I will hold you to your words, too. If ever you dream of marrying another man, I will tell him what you said. Yes, I will do that and more, and——"

"Let me pass," she cried; "as though I could ever dream of marrying an honourable man after promising to be the wife of such as you. Stand aside, or I will call the servants."

But she had no need to make this threat. Her words had crushed him too completely. He obeyed her like a frightened child, and then watched her with a dazed look in his eyes as she walked out of the room.

"Now go," said John Castlemaine, as he rang the bell. A servant appeared, and Radford Leicester

walked out of the house with the black night of hell in his heart.

The carriage was still waiting, and both men entered without a word.

"Where to, sir?" asked the coachman.

But Leicester did not reply, indeed he did not know the man had spoken.

"Where to, sir?" repeated the driver in a louder voice.

Winfield mentioned the name of a station which they had come from that morning. For two miles they rode in silence, then Leicester turned and looked at his companion.

"Are you doing anything particular this afternoon, Winfield?" he said.

"No. Nothing in particular."

"Then come back with me to the club, will you?"

"Yes, if you wish."

"Thank you." And again he looked out of the carriage window in a way that made Winfield sorry he had given his promise.

After they had got into the train, and were on their way back to London, Leicester spoke again.

"Winfield," he said, "do you think she meant what she said? that is, do you think she will ever be led to change her mind?"

"All things are possible," said Winfield.

"Yes, but do you think she will?"

"No," said Winfield, "I do not believe she ever will." He was sorry, after he had spoken, that he had not fenced with the question, so terrible was the look in Leicester's eyes.

"Ah," he replied, "I was only curious to know what you thought. I have always looked upon you as a level-headed fellow."

"I think," said Winfield, "that her pride was wounded, that she was very angry at being made the subject of a wager. What woman wouldn't? Then that conversation we had together a few weeks ago was made to look very black. Of course you might write a letter, giving a full explanation. By to-morrow she will be able to see things in a clearer light."

"No," said Leicester, "she never will."

Winfield was silent.

"Still, I'll write the letter."

"I should."

"I'll write it as soon as we get back to the club. I'll state the whole truth. I ought to have done it before."

"It would have been best. But who would have thought that those two fellows would have——"

"Don't talk about them yet, Winfield. Please don't—if—if—but never mind that now."

The man's face was contorted with passion, but he spoke quietly, almost coldly. Winfield shivered as he spoke, however. If ever murder burned in a man's eyes, it burned in Leicester's at that moment.

Directly they arrived at the club, he seized a pen and wrote rapidly, while Winfield remained near him smoking a cigar. Page after page was covered with Leicester's bold, clear writing; when he had finished he passed what he had written to Winfield.

"It's mean of me to bother you," he said, "but I'm quite bowled over. I hardly know whether I've set everything down exactly as it occurred. Would

you mind reading what I've written and tell me whether I've made the whole affair plain ? ”

Winfield read the letter from the first word to the last.

“ Yes,” he said ; “ nothing could be more clearly stated. Nothing could be more plain or straightforward.”

“ Thank you. I wanted to be sure I was in my right mind. I'll not trouble you with the rest of the letter.”

Again he wrote ; and this time it was evident by the look on his face that he was setting down what was only for Olive Castlemaine's eyes. As a matter of fact, he was pleading with her as only a desperate man can plead. He threw his pride to the winds, and prayed her mercy and her forgiveness.

“ What time is it ? ” he said, when he had finished.

“ Three o'clock,” said Winfield, looking at his watch, “ and I've had no lunch.”

“ No ; you expected—that is, we expected to—— I say, Winfield, I'm going to send this by hand.”

“ Wait until to-morrow.”

“ No ; to-morrow is an eternity. I must send it now. Great God ! you don't know what this means to me. Get your lunch, Winfield ; I'll be back presently.”

He left the room as he spoke, while Winfield went into the dining-room.

“ Poor beggar,” said the young man as he examined the menu, “ he's got it bad, and no wonder ; for it was a knock-down blow. Well, it must be kept out of the papers, anyhow.”

When he had nearly finished his lunch Leicester joined him.

"I've sent it off," he said, "and have told the man to wait for an answer"

"Better if you'd waited until to-morrow," said Winfield.

"I couldn't, man. Most likely she'll go away somewhere to-night—that is—unless—you know. If I'd waited until to-morrow, she'd never have got my letter, she'd be on the way to the Continent, or—heaven knows where. No, I've done right."

"Perhaps you have. Anyhow, sit down and get some lunch. A man must eat, you know."

"I could just as easily fly. Ah, and that reminds me. Winfield, let's go for a ride out in the country. We can get a couple of horses at Bilson's. He has a mad mare that I want to ride. She's a fearful creature, and scarcely any one dares to mount her. I must do something to keep the devil out of me."

"Very well. I'm just in the humour for a gallop; but get some lunch, old man."

"Come on, if you have finished. We can get to Wimbledon Common in an hour—in less than an hour. Then we will give those horses of Bilson's a chance to know what they can do."

"But we must get some riding togs on, old man. You can't go a-riding with a frock coat, and a top hat."

"Oh, I forgot; but that's soon remedied. We can be back by seven or eight o'clock, and by that time there should be—an answer."

A few minutes later, they were on their way towards Wimbledon Common. But for Winfield, Leicester would have galloped through the crowded streets, and more than once he was on the point of

resenting his companion's restrictions. When they arrived at the open country, however, he gave his horse rein, and tore across the Common, while Winfield kept close at his heels.

"I wish I could ride to Brighton," said Leicester presently. "This helps me to keep the devil down."

"Why not?" said Winfield.

"I must get back now," he replied. "There will be an answer to my letter. It may be—you see—she is very just."

"What does a man want of women while he has a good horse under him, the open sky above him, and the country all around him?" asked Winfield, with a laugh.

"What does a man want with heaven when he's been living in hell?" asked Leicester.

"As you will, Leicester," said his companion; "but take my advice. Don't expect—too much, and make up your mind to have a good time, whatever may happen."

Leicester laughed, and it was the laugh of a madman.

"Do you believe in the devil, Winfield?" he said.

"I don't see that the devil has anything to do with it," replied the other. "We are young, we have life before us, and——"

But Leicester did not listen to him further. He struck his spurs into his horse's sides, and the animal tore off at a mad gallop. Winfield's horse started to follow, but the young man held him back. "Let him go," he said to himself, "he's better without me. I've made a mistake evidently, and, great heavens! I don't like to think of what will happen."

Winfield watched the other, who galloped wildly across the broad open space, and then waited while he rode the mad passion out of himself.

When Leicester returned, half an hour later, there was a quieter look in his eyes, his face looked more natural.

"I thought you'd gone, Winfield," he said; "let's get back to town. What a wedding-day I'm having, eh?"

Both their horses were black with sweat when they returned them to the job-master from whom they had borrowed them, but Leicester did not wait to listen to the man's remarks. He hurried back to the club, and went straight to the office.

"Any letters for me?" he asked.

A number were handed to him which had come through the post.

"Not these," he said impatiently. "Has one come by private messenger?"

"Oh yes, I had forgotten. Here it is, sir."

He took the letter. Yes, it was addressed in Olive Castlemaine's hand-writing, and without a word he rushed straight to his bedroom. He wanted to be alone. Feverishly he turned on the electric light, and then broke the seal. The envelope contained nothing but his own unopened letter.

For some time he stood still. No sound, no movement did he make. He felt now that the last thread which held him to hope was broken, and yet he could not realise what it meant. Ever since he had left The Beeches that morning, he had lived in a kind of trance. The blow which had fallen had to an extent paralysed him. Everything seemed a long way off, even although he knew that a tragedy had taken place

in his own life. Presently, however, it became real to him. Hope was gone, joy was gone, purpose was gone. The sun had gone down on his wedding-day, and it had also gone down on his life. There was no light anywhere. For years he had lived a hopeless life, for years he had been chained by a degrading habit, for years he had ceased to believe in God, in virtue—in anything that made life worth the living. Then a new force had come into his life. Hope, faith, and more than all, love had sprung up in his heart. The world had become new, and he knew what heaven meant. Then, when the day had come on which all his desires were to be fully realised, black ruin had fallen. The new-born hope and faith were destroyed in an hour. No ray of light appeared anywhere.

"Leicester, old man, may I come in?" It was Winfield who spoke.

"No—yes—that is, who are you?"

"It is I, Winfield."

"Come in."

Winfield entered, and he had no need to be told what had happened. For this reason he asked no questions, he only said:

"Come and have some dinner, Leicester."

"Look," said Leicester, showing him the unopened letter.

"Yes, I see, old man. Come and have some dinner."

"Good," replied Leicester feverishly, "that's it, dinner! Haven't I always maintained that there was no love affair in the world but could be cured by a good dinner and a bottle of champagne? We'll prove

it, old man. Dinner, that's it; and afterwards—we'll make a night of it somewhere."

A new light had come into his eyes, and even Winfield, who was no saint, saw that it was evil.

"I haven't touched a drop of whisky for months," went on Leicester. "I've been a whining dog, running at the heels of—but there, I'll make up for lost time to-night. Come on, Winfield!"

"Haden't we better dress for dinner?" said Winfield. "I always keep some dress' clothes here at the club."

"Hang dressing! Let's go as we are; how can we be better dressed for a drinking bout than in riding attire? Tally ho! my boy. 'If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?' That's the proper spirit, isn't it? I've been a sort of a dog led by a string for the last few months, now I am free again. I was becoming the kind of man that every one should despise, a whining sentimentalist. I had actually begun to talk about the moral aspect of things. What of that? It's never too late to mend, eh, Winfield? Off with the trappings, have done with shams, Richard's himself again! Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die."

His face was still pale, but his eyes shone with a mad light.

"But we can't go down like this, Leicester, we may as well——"

"All right, have your own way. I'll join you in five minutes. 'The apparel oft proclaims the man,' therefore let us be respectable. Respectable, oh, I'll let some of 'em know what respectability means."

Winfield left the room deep in thought. He was a man of the world, but he was sorry to see how Leicester

was taking his blow. He would rather have seen him give way to grief, or make threats of vengeance.

A few minutes later they met in the dining-room. Both were in faultless attire, although Winfield noticed that his friend's mood had not changed.

"The club dinner," said Leicester to the waiter, "and let us have it at once."

"Yes, sir. What'll you take to drink, sir?"

"Drink! Oh, whisky and soda. Bring a large bottle of each."

The waiter went away. He had heard that Leicester was to have been married that day, and he naturally wondered what he was doing there; but of course he showed no surprise.

"By the way, Leicester," said Winfield, as he toyed with a piece of bread on the table, "I've been thinking that things may not be so bad as we thought."

"Oh, chuck it, Winfield. I've learnt my lesson. I've been a fool, but I'll not close my eyes to facts any longer."

"She may love you still," persisted the other.

"Woman's love! I was right in the old days. It's all a matter of price; only I made a mistake about the price. I didn't reckon upon a woman's vanity—that's all."

"Well, let us meet facts fairly. It was natural that she should be mad. When a high-minded girl like Miss Castlemaine——"

"High-minded! Don't talk such drivel."

"Yes, I repeat, high-minded. When she is told that the engagement was a matter of a wager, and when, after the wedding-day was fixed, you admitted that it was still a matter of winning the wager, then——"

"What are you driving at? I say, I'll kick up a row about the management of this club. That whisky has been ordered at least three minutes, and it's not brought yet."

"I'm driving at this. She was mad, and her madness was justifiable, but by to-morrow she'll have calmed down. I told you it was too soon for you to send that letter. If I were you I'd go down again to-morrow, and I'll warrant she'll be in a different frame of mind."

Winfield was wanting to gain time. He knew that if the whisky came while Leicester was in his present mood, nothing would stop him from fulfilling his threat.

"She returned my letter unopened. She did not deign to read a word."

"Yes, and it was quite natural; but give her breathing space, old man. She's a proud girl, you know that, and well—she would not listen to reason. But through to-night she'll be lonely. She'll be thinking of the past. She'll recall many things which hadn't occurred to her in her anger. To-morrow, mark my word, she'll be longing to see you."

The waiter came, bringing a bottle of whisky, and placed it on the table, but Leicester did not touch it.

Winfield sent the waiter away on some trifling commission, and then he went on:

"If I were you, I would not start drinking to-night. You might be mistaken, you know, and if you are——"

Leicester rose to his feet hurriedly.

"I can't eat, Winfield, and I can't sit down to the mockery of a dinner. I'm going somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Probably to throw myself in the

Thames. Sorry to be such a fool, old man. A good appetite to you."

He rushed out of the club, and did not return till past midnight; but when he returned he showed no signs of drinking.

The next morning he started for The Beeches again.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST LINK BROKEN

BY ten o'clock Leicester was at the door of John Castlemaine's house. Any one who had seen him on his way from London the previous morning would not have recognised him as the same man. For one thing he looked at least ten years older. His face was haggard, his eyes were dull, he walked with a kind of hesitation. The grounds were deserted, no one was anywhere visible.

He rang the door bell, and a minute later the door was opened by the old servant who had appeared the day before.

"Is Miss Castlemaine at home?"

"No, sir."

"Come, now, that is a polite figment. You mean that she is not at home to me."

"I mean what I say, sir; she is not at home."

"And Mr. Castlemaine?"

"He's not at home either, sir."

"Do you mean to say they are gone away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Come, now, no more of your lies," he said. "You

know very well. Tell me, I'll make it worth your while."

He felt angry with himself for speaking in this way, but he had lost his self-control.

"I don't know, sir," repeated the man.

"When did they go?"

"Last night, sir."

"What time?"

"I didn't notice, sir," and he prepared to close the door.

"Come now, you are not to get away like this. Listen to me a minute longer." He spoke in his old tone of command, and the man instinctively felt like obeying.

"You say they went away last night. Was it late?"

"Yes, sir—that is, I didn't notice the time."

"But late?"

"Yes, sir—that is, I should think so; but as I said——"

"They went abroad?"

"Yes, sir—that is, they didn't tell me."

"But you have some idea where they are gone?"

The man was silent.

Leicester took a step nearer, while the man shrank back.

"No, my man," he said, "you are not going till you tell me what you know."

The old servant looked around fearfully, and then said:

"I know nothing, sir; nobody knows anything."

"Don't tell any more lies. They must have letters forwarded."

"The housekeeper may know, sir."

"The housekeeper is at home?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me see her."

"No, sir. You must see no one in the house. Sorry, sir, but orders is orders."

"You have received orders about me?"

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Sorry, sir; but last night, sir. You were to be ordered away if you came."

Leicester laughed bitterly.

"Ah, I see. Mr. and Miss Castlemaine left last night, and they told no one but the housekeeper where they were going, but they gave orders that the dogs were to be set upon me."

"Not quite so bad as that, sir, but——"

"I see. Yes, I understand."

"You see Miss Castlemaine is very ill, sir," said the man, as though he recollected something. "Of course that was why the wedding couldn't take place. A sort of stroke I think it was."

Leicester laughed aloud.

"Good," he said, "and Mr. and Miss Castlemaine are gone away together?"

"With Mr. Sackville, the minister, sir."

"Oh, the parson, eh! Good. Was she *very* much worse after I left yesterday?"

"I never saw her, sir. I know nothing. All I know is, that they're gone away for a goodish bit, but where they're gone I don't know. But I did have orders to send you away. I'm very sorry, sir. Will you excuse me now, sir? I have my dooties."

Leicester took a sovereign from his pocket, and threw it to the man.

"All right, Simmons," he said, "have a good time while they are away. You are a very fair liar, Simmons, a very fair liar indeed."

He strode back to the station, and waited for a train to take him back to London. The porters watched him curiously. They had heard scores of rumours, and thus this man was of great interest to them. They had heard that Miss Castlemaine had been told that he was already married; they had been also told that he was guilty of forgery, and had lately come out of gaol. Others again had it that it was not because of Leicester at all that the wedding had not taken place, but that Miss Castlemaine had been taken ill the previous day, and on calling in the doctor she had been told that she must not think of getting married, but must immediately leave the country. One report had it that the doctor had told her she could not live six months, while another rumour said that if she went away for a twelve months' voyage around the world she might return well and strong. Of course the servants had been closely questioned, but their knowledge was very scanty, and such as they had they were forbidden on pain of dismissal to divulge.

But Leicester took no notice of those who directed their glances towards him. He might have been in a trance for all the cognisance he took of his surroundings. He had some time to wait for his train, and he walked slowly up and down the platform, heedless of everything.

"Sad about Miss Castlemaine, sir."

He turned and saw the station-master, who was a noted gossip. Leicester looked straight at the man, but did not utter a word.

"Of course it must be terrible for you, sir. Nobody

ever suspected that she was ill ; but it must be terrible, for Mr. Castlemaine told me himself when he left last night that they might not return for months."

" Ah, he told you that, did he ? "

" Yes, sir. I could see he was in great trouble ; but he scarcely spoke to me, which is different from what he usually is. He often had a chat with me in the mornings when waiting for his train. He always took the same train, the 10.9, and he was always here five minutes before time. However, when I asked him, he told me he was going abroad. What part have they gone to, sir ? "

" Did he not tell you ? "

" No, I asked him ; but he seemed as though he didn't want to talk. Of course you know, sir ? Where are they gone, if I might ask ? "

But Leicester turned on his heel and walked away. The old servant had told him the truth, then. He turned to the bookstall and began to idly read the posters. " Postponement of a fashionable wedding. Bride taken dangerously ill," he read.

" Another religious lie," and he laughed bitterly. " These pious people know how to hush up things by fraud."

He bought a paper, and got into the train which was just entering the station. He had the carriage all to himself, and so was able to read the news unobserved. He was not long in finding the paragraph he desired.

" Postponement of wedding," he read. " The marriage between Radford Leicester, Esq., and Miss Olive Castlemaine, which was arranged for yesterday, has been indefinitely postponed, owing to the serious illness of the latter. The large number of guests who had

been invited to The Beeches received an early intimation that the wedding would not take place, and on inquiries as to the reason, we are informed that Miss Castlemaine was taken seriously ill a few hours before the time announced for the nuptials. We are also given to understand that Miss Castlemaine has been ordered out of England for a lengthened stay, and that, accompanied by her father and her maid, they left London for the Continent last night. The reason of the sudden illness of the bride is causing much discussion in the neighbourhood of Miss Castlemaine's home."

Leicester threw the paper from him with an oath. "Lies, lies, lies!" he muttered. "And she connives at them. She the Sunday-school teacher, the immaculate one. She threw me over because her pride was wounded, but she could tell lies in order to hide the truth. Oh, what a blithering fool I've been! Why did I not—but there——! What's the use of anything?"

"It's all over now," he went on presently. "That chapter is written, the play's played out. Is it, though? Shall I be beaten in this way? The truth concerning this affair is bound to become known. People are not going to be fooled by a bungling report like this. Taken seriously ill in the morning, and off to the Continent in the evening! Bah, even the British public is not so blind as that!

"Well, what now? Shall I tamely submit to this? In a few days I shall be the laughing-stock of every one who knows me. Perhaps I am now. Purvis and Sprague are by this time enjoying themselves hugely. For it is they who have done this. One or both of them, it does not matter. But I'll settle my accounts with them. As for her——!"

He ground his teeth together, and his eyes shone like the eyes of a madman.

"I'll have her yet!" he cried. "To begin with, I have her sacred promise that she'll never marry another man. Even yesterday she told me that she could not dream of being the wife of an honourable man after promising to marry such a thing as I. But she shall pay for that, by —— she shall! Yes, my proud lady, I'll humble your pride to the dust. You shall eat your words."

He started to his feet, and paced the empty carriage like a mad lion paces his cage. A new passion had laid hold of him now.

"No more whining sentimentality for me!" he cried, "no more moral platitudes, no more drivel about trying to be a good man. Good man! Ha, ha! But I'll humble her; yes, I'll not be beaten. Yes, and when I've got my way, I'll taunt her with her words, I'll make her suffer what I'm suffering; ay, and more—if it is possible. You little thought, my pattern young Sunday-school teacher, of what you were doing when you drove me to the devil."

He caught up the paper, and read the paragraph again. On the face of it, it was a lie, a poor clumsy attempt to cover up the truth. The world would soon know all about it. There were at least seven in the secret. There was Purvis, and Sprague, and Winfield, and John Castlemaine—yes, and the minister Sackville. John Castlemaine would be sure to tell him. Then, as a matter of course, the minister would tell his wife. After that—well, every old woman in the congregation would mouth the spicy bit of gossip. Miss Castlemaine had cast him off, because he in a drunken freak had

made a wager that he would win her as his wife, and she had found him out! He reflected on the way that the fat silly old women in the world of so-called Society would discuss it over afternoon tea, he imagined brainless dudes giving their opinions about him over their whiskies. The men he had despised would pity him, and utter inanities about him. Of course the news would reach his constituency too. What capital his opponents would make of it all! He imagined the leading article which would appear in the rag called *The Taviton Argus*, about the reasons for Miss Castlemaine being taken suddenly ill. And it would all be true! Ay, and what was worse, people would say that he, Leicester, the cynic, the man who despised the conventional goodness of the age, had become a teetotaler, a supporter of philanthropic institutions in order to win a wager. Ay, more, he who had laughed at religion had gone to church like a family grocer, had sat in the pew of a Nonconforming conventicle, and had listened to the prosy platitudes of an unctuous spiritual shepherd, to win a girl who had found him out. He fancied the cartoons which would appear in *The Taviton Argus*, picturing him sitting in church, and singing Sankey's hymns. Perhaps they would have him kneeling at the penitent form, all to get a girl who found him out to be a liar and a hypocrite!

The reflection maddened him. But he would pay them all out. Yes, Purvis and Sprague should bitterly repent the day they opposed his will; as for Olive Castlemaine—well, she should suffer more than he was suffering.

But this mood did not last long. Try as he might he could not hide the gloomy black future which

loomed before him. He pictured himself as he was before the wager was made, a hopeless cynic, a hard bitter man, a slave to whisky. And he was worse now. He had been in heaven during these last few months. Yes, he could not deny that a woman had cleared his cloudy sky, and had aroused in him hopes and longings to which he had been a stranger. The future had appeared to him as a paradise, a heaven because a woman he loved more than words could say had promised to be his wife. Oh, and he had loved her! Say what he would about the falseness of women, and the evil of the world, this woman had changed everything for him, so that he had contemplated the future with joy; but now he saw nothing but hell. What had the future for him now? Lonely misery, haunted by bitter thoughts of what might have been. What was a seat in Parliament now? Who cared about him? For years he had alienated those who would be his friends, he had become a pariah, a kind of intellectual and moral Ishmael. How could he bear it?

With this thought the craving for whisky came back to him again. He had promised Olive he would never touch it again, but that was a thing of the past. Yes, he would go back to his club, and he would drink until he forgot. He would debauch himself with spirits. He had been a fool ever to give it up. God, if there were a God, offered him nothing; nay, more, He had taken from him the one thing that would have made a man of him; but the devil was faithful. The whisky bottle could be always kept close to his elbow. Yes, and he would run the whole gamut of sin. There was nothing to restrain him, and he had no motive power to make him desire anything else.

When the train arrived at the terminus, he jumped into a cab, and drove straight to his club. No, he would not go to the smoke-room, he would go to his own private room, and there he would drink and forget. A few minutes later, he sat alone in his room, a bottle of whisky by his side. With steady hands he uncorked it, and poured out a large quantity; he filled the tumbler with soda-water, and looked at the yellow liquid as it sparkled in the glass.

"Here is my wife now," he cried. "She will be faithful to me, or even if she fails, there is that green devil called absinthe. No, no, the devil does not forsake a man while he has a five-pound note in his pocket."

Even then he did not lift the glass to his lips. After all, those months during which he had known Olive still counted. It was true that in spite of his resolutions he doubted whether he would ever meet her again; but those hours he had spent by her side were not without their influence. After all, to be a man was nobler than to be a beast. He recalled her words on the night he had made known his love to her. She had told him that the man who trusted in a woman for his salvation rested on a weak reed, and that only God could save a man. He remembered his answer too.

"If there is a God, I have given Him His chance," he cried, "and He has failed me. Now I choose this yellow devil. A fascinating devil, too. See how tight and sparkling he is!"

He held the glass up to the light, and watched while the bright gaseous globules floated from the bottom of the glass to the top.

"Good-bye to false sentiment and false ideals, to

false hopes and foolish fancies!" he cried, "and hereby I do take thee to be my lawful wedded wife from this day forward, to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to love and to cherish, till death us do part!"

He laughed as he uttered the words.

"All joy to you Radford Leicester, on your wedding-day," he said aloud, "and may you and your wife be faithful to each other."

And still he hesitated. It might seem as though an invisible angel of goodness held his hand. Then his thoughts flew to the past, and again to the future. What had the future for him? He lifted the glass to his lips, and drank; when he set it down it was nearly empty.

"Ah, but this is the great forgetter," he said.

He sat down in an armchair, and closed his eyes. In a few minutes the strong spirit began to have its effect on him. The fire crept along his veins, he felt his nerves tingling.

"It's because I've not touched it for so long," he said. "A few months ago I should not have known I had tasted a drop like this."

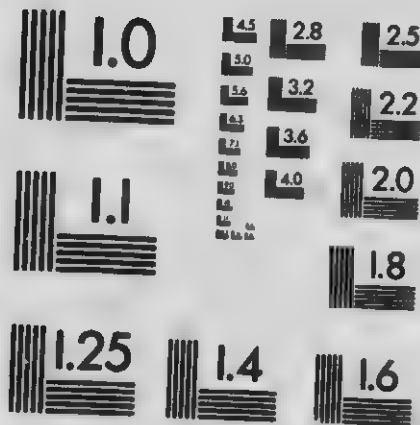
He drained the glass to the bottom, and poured out more. For two hours he remained there, drinking, and brooding, and trying to forget.

Presently he arose, and went down to the smoking-room. He walked steadily, but he never remembered whisky to affect him as it was affecting him now. He wanted companionship; the whisky had destroyed all desire for privacy. On entering the room, he saw that the men who had gathered there were greatly excited. He had expected that some one would pretend to com-



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miserate with him on the postponement of his marriage, but to his surprise no one seemed to heed him.

"Ah, MacGregor," he said, to a young Scotchman, whom he knew slightly, "the devil hasn't claimed you yet, then. But trust a Scotchman to outwit even the devil."

"Leicester, is that you?" said the Scotchman. "I heard you were off for your honeymoon; but I suppose even happy bridegrooms have to submit to General Elections."

"General Elections—what do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

The Scotchman laughed.

"Why, where have you been during the day?"

"I've been busy in my room," he replied warily.

"But haven't you heard?"

"I've heard nothing."

"What, not that there has been a dissolution of Parliament?"

"What?"

"Just that. We'll all have to hurry off to our constituencies now—that is, those of us who have been fools enough to meddle with politics. I'm off in two hours."

"Well, you will be all right. You'll get returned again, I suppose?"

"Yes, thanks to my wife, I believe I shall. She's far more popular in the constituency than I, and people will vote for me for her sake. I suppose you'll be off to Taverton to-night?"

"Not I."

"But, man, it'll be——"

"It's not worth the candle," said Leicester; "what's the odds which party is in? Liberal or Conservative, it's only a question of which set of maggots shall eat the cheese." The words which MacGregor had spoken about his wife had stung him.

"But that's all nonsense. It's true you've lately got married, but you must go down and fight. It'll be all beer and skittles with you. A good speaker like you, and just married to a charming and rich wife, can do anything. An electioneering honeymoon! My word, that will be a new thing in wedded life. Quite a subject for a romance. By the way, I have not congratulated you. How is Mrs. Leicester?"

He turned on his heel and walked away.

"Hullo, Leicester," said another man, "here you are. By the way, what is the truth about that paragraph I saw in the papers?"

"Oh, it's all right."

"Is—is Miss Castlemaine seriously ill?"

"I don't know, and I don't care."

"You don't mean to say that——"

"I mean to say that I'll have a drink with you, Bryant," he said.

"But you've turned teetotaler."

"Then I'll break my pledge. What'll you take?"

"But, I say, Leicester——"

"Will you have a drink?"

"With pleasure, only I thought that——"

"I was a reformed rake, eh? Well, I'm not. Whiskies for two, waiter. I say, tell us about this dissolution. What do you think about it?"

"I think our side will have a stiff fight. Besides, you know what has to be our chief card?"

"I know nothing, I've been busy with—other things."

Bryant laughed.

"What is the meaning of this postponement of your marriage, Leicester? Did you know the Government was going to smash up?"

"Why, you know we've been expecting it every day." He despised himself for using this subterfuge, but he could think of nothing better to say. "What is to be our chief card, Bryant?"

"The drink question, licensing reform, and all that kind of rot."

"Then let's drink to the success of the destruction of the drink curse, Bryant," he said. "It's all of a piece."

The other looked at him curiously. This was not like the Leicester he had known lately.

"I say, Leicester, has that girl jilted you?" he said.

The words stung him more than anything he had heard during the day.

"Yes," he said angrily, "and your wife would have jilted you, if I had proposed to her on the morning of your wedding-day."

With that he got up and walked away. He could not stay among these men any longer. He would go down to the National, and find out more particulars about the dissolution. It would help him to forget. When he returned, two hours later, he found a telegram awaiting him. It was from the chairman of his political association. "Urgent that you come down immediately," he read; "to-morrow, if possible. Wire if I may arrange for a big meeting in Taverton to-morrow night. Have forestalled others and taken hall

provisionally. Don't fail. Deeply sorry to hear about Miss Castlemaine."

Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he seized a telegraph form, and said that he would be at Taviton the next day.

"There," he said, as he sent it off, "drink and politics will help me to forget," but he did not dream of what would happen before the morrow came to an end.

CHAPTER XIII

DEGRADATION

"I HOPE you don't mind, Mr. Leicester, but I was obliged to make arrangements. As soon as I got the telegram saying that Parliament had dissolved, I thought I had better take the bull by the horns, and——"

"It's all right, Smith, all right. I don't feel like election speeches, but they've got to be made, and we'll fight this affair for all it's worth."

"Thank you, Mr. Leicester, you relieve my mind very much. Of course I saw that paragraph in the newspaper yesterday, and I knew that you must be greatly upset. I sincerely hope it's nothing serious, and that Miss Castlemaine will soon be well."

"We'll drop Miss Castlemaine, please."

Smith was Leicester's election agent, and seemed anxious to make certain explanations.

"Certainly, sir. I only thought——"

"All right, but there are certain subjects I wish avoided—that's one."

The man knew nothing but what had appeared in the papers; but Leicester had a feeling that he knew everything and spoke accordingly. Besides, he had scarcely slept through the night, and he was a prey to dark fancies.

Smith looked at him wonderingly. He had many doubts about telegraphing Leicester, and had feared that he would not come to Taviton at all. There had been a great deal of gossip in the town about the postponed wedding, and already the opposition party had been seeking to make capital out of it.

"Forgive me, Mr. Leicester," he said, "but my own opinion is that, properly worked, this should bring us a good many votes. Of course we had hoped that when the election took place Mrs. Leicester would appear on the platform with you, and be a kind of leader among the ladies. I have only had the pleasure of meeting her once, but from an electioneering standpoint, I should say she was just perfect, sir, just perfect. Well, if a judicious statement were made at the meeting to-night—I repeat the word judicious, sir—and delicately put, to the effect that, that is—well, sir, she is very ill, but is greatly grieved that she is not able to be with you, and that the doctors hope that in a few months, perhaps less, sir, the wedding will come off, I believe it would work wonders. Of course I don't press it, sir, but if she could send a message to be read at one of the public meetings, it would——"

But Leicester did not let him finish the sentence. At first he had listened in a dazed sort of way, scarcely realising what he was saying, but as the man continued he lost his self-control.

"Curse it, Smith," he said, "haven't I told you to drop that question."

But Smith was one of those persistent men who will not be turned aside from his purpose.

"I know it must be painful to you, sir, and you being so fond of each other, too. But the truth is, the

other side is talking,—too much for your good, I am inclined to think."

"Let it talk," said Leicester angrily.

"Yes, sir, but I have my own reputation to think of, as well as yours. I've never lost an election yet, sir, and I don't mean to leave any stone unturned in order to win this. It was at my suggestion that Mr. Grayburn wired to you last night, and I've been working like a slave ever since. Judiciously managed, sir, the fact of the postponement of your wedding may do us a lot of good. Judiciously managed, sir, of course. Weak heart, sir, I was thinking about, and then excess of joy at the thought of the wedding, brought on dangerous complications which made a journey out of the country inevitable. That is what I suggest, sir. And may I also say, sir, that you made a bad move in not coming down by the six o'clock train, as I wired this morning. I could then have got a big turn-out to meet you. The proper thing was what I wanted, I had arranged for a lot of men to take the horses out of the carriage I had engaged, and have drawn you up to town in style. Your wire an hour ago, saying you would be here earlier, gave me no time, sir. Still, I must get over that; but I do urge the other, sir. I quite appreciate the delicacy of your feelings, but we must put our feelings in the background at electioneering times. In fact, as you may know, Miss Castlemaine had her photograph taken when she was down here, and I've had a slide made of it for a magic lantern. My idea is that her picture be thrown on a screen to-night before the chairman speaks, and that an explanation be made about the postponement of the wedding. I can explain about your coming down un-

expectedly. I can say that after your great trouble, although your sense of duty made you overcome it in order to come down early, you did not feel like being met by a crowd of your loyal supporters. That would be a good card, sir, and it would tell with the voters."

The man's words angered him, but he controlled himself. After all, why shouldn't he let him have his way? The whole thing was a bit of play-acting, a farce, a mockery—why not play the game thoroughly then?

He had been drinking freely through the day, and while, as of old, it did not affect him outwardly, it influenced him far more than it would have done a few months before. His abstinence had made him far more susceptible to the power of whisky. Under its influence, moreover, he felt like consenting to things which without it he would have scorned. What had taken place had utterly destroyed the feelings which Olive Castlemaine had caused to take root in his heart. Besides, this would be one method of paying off old scores. Let the farce be kept up. Nothing mattered now. Even if the truth were discovered he did not care.

"Of course the notice is short," went on the election agent, "but I thought it better to strike while the iron was hot. The dissolution yesterday came upon us like a bombshell, but I determined to make capital out of it, and I tell you, sir, there'll be a tremendous crowd to hear you to-night. There'll be two cards to play, sir. First we shall arouse a tremendous amount of sympathy for you, on account of Miss Castlemaine being taken ill, that is if the matter is judiciously worked; and then, second, the people are just burning to hear about the causes which led to the Government's downfall. Of

course you've got everything first hand, sir. That's enough for to-night, and if we play our game well, the battle is nearly won before the other side have had a chance to get a look in."

"All right," said Leicester desperately, "anything to win."

"That's the proper spirit, anything to win. But I've a bit of unpleasant news, sir—perhaps you can explain it?"

"What?" asked Leicester.

"Well, you know, sir, you have generally stayed with Mr. Osborne at The Grange when you've visited the constituency. Accordingly, I took the liberty of calling upon him to-day, suggesting that he should invite you, as on other occasions, but he refused to do so."

"Just so," said Leicester; "did he tell you why?"

"Not a word, sir; as a consequence I engaged rooms for you here at the Red Lion."

"That's all right," he said. "Mr. Osborne is a little out of sympathy with us just now; but on the whole I am very glad. I would much rather be here in the hotel."

"Still, it's a bit of a knockdown blow. Mr. Osborne is the most influential man in the constituency, and the other side will be sure to ask ugly questions."

"Let them ask."

"Very well, sir. Then you'll let me arrange things in my own way, and make what explanation I think fit."

"Yes, anything you like. And look here, Smith, spare neither money nor lies. It seems they are both necessary. Only, as you say, let everything be judiciously managed." And he laughed bitterly.

"Trust me for that, sir, trust me for that. You wouldn't like to go round to the Central Committee Rooms, sir? I've arranged to meet the principal workers there."

"No, I'll not go just now. Don't let me detain you, Smith. I shall want something to eat, and a little time to think of my speech. And, by the way, I don't want to be disturbed by any one, until a quarter of an hour before the meeting. You understand that?"

"Quite, Mr. Leicester. I'm glad you approve of the steps I've taken."

"Delighted, delighted. You've done marvels."

"I've worked like a slave all day; there's been a thousand things to arrange. But I'm what the Americans call a bit of a hustler, and I mean to win. One must not be too squeamish at times like these, you know. I was afraid a few weeks ago that you were going to hamper me with foolish restrictions, but I am glad you give me a free hand."

"Yes, go ahead, only be judicious. Don't give the other side any chance of making us come a cropper."

"I'll see to that," and the agent departed.

When he was gone, Leicester lay back in his chair and laughed bitterly.

"What's the odds?" he said. "Let him do what he likes. I don't care. The whole business is a piece of jobbery. Smith thinks he's clever, and is trying to outwit the agent on the other side, while he in his turn is trying to outwit Smith. Well, let them. I'll get into Parliament, and I'll play the game, and yes, I'll make Olive Castlemaine come to me on bended knees. I hurt her pride, did I, by making her the subject of a wager? Well, she would listen to no explanation

afterwards, and now she shall take the consequences. I see the meaning of Osborne's action. John Castlemaine will have sent him some account of this business, and—and—well, it's no use worrying. I'll make them all squirm before I've finished; yes, and I'll win my wager too!"

His eyes flashed with a dangerous light. "High ideals! Moral purpose! Raise the standard of politics! Those were her watchwords!" And he laughed mockingly.

He was sitting in a private room in the Red Lion Hotel, and, as he had said, he was glad that he was to have the liberty of the hotel, rather than suffer the restrictions which a private house would place upon him. Moreover, Bridget Osborne, as the friend of Clive Castlemaine, would learn something of the truth, and it would be impossible for him to stay there.

"I will keep up the farce of respectability," he said; "reports have been spread that I've turned teetotaler. Well, I'll play the hypocrite."

He rang the bell and a waiter appeared.

"I'll have dinner alone here at seven o'clock," he said.

"Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"Yes, a bottle of soda-water."

"Nothing with it, sir?"

"No, nothing."

He laughed as the man left the room. The old peculiar look had returned to his eyes. After the waiter had brought a bottle of soda-water and a tumbler, he went to his portmanteau, and took therefrom a bottle of whisky. He poured a large portion into the glass, added a little soda-water, and drank greedily.

"I shall suffer the torments of hell if I keep up this," he said; "but I don't care. It's better than eternally brooding. Now I'll set to work on my speech. Oh yes, she'll be sure to get a copy of the Taverton papers, trust a woman for that,—well, she shall see that I can do without her."

His brain was still clear, and he showed no outward signs of drinking. Men had said that his nerves were of steel, and that no spirits ever distilled could affect him. He outlined the address he intended to publish next day, and then sketched the speech he meant to deliver that night. He laughed as his pen moved quickly across the paper.

"They want lies," he laughed, "they want pious platitudes; well, they shall have them, and they shan't suspect that the man who utters them is drunk, and that he's living in hell."

Again and again did he replenish his glass, and as often did he empty it; but it still had no outward effect, save that his eyes became glazed, and dull, and his face assumed an unhealthy look. His hand did not shake, his writing was as clear as ever. His thoughts were expressed in clear and convincing form.

"Yes," he said presently, "that will do. Olive's illness explained in vague terms, but still explicit enough to satisfy every one. I'll arouse their sentimental feelings, and get their votes. Of course the truth will come out presently, but what do I care? Further lies will put everything right. They want lies and they shall have them—the world is built on lies. Then I'll have a fine high-sounding attack on the Government. Oh, I'll play the moral card, showing that their downfall is a judgment from heaven. That'll please

the pious Nonconformists. After that I'll finish up with the statement that the battle of this election is a battle between sobriety and drunkenness, between the friends of temperance and the brewers and whisky distillers. I'll have a fine peroration on the evils of drink; I'll picture a hundred and fifty thousand poor devils staggering down to drunkards' graves every year. That'll fetch 'em. Of course I shall be drunk all the time, but what does that matter? In the old days I made my best speeches when I was drunk, and to-night I'll give them a masterpiece. Of course the other side will inquire here about what I've taken to drink, and the waiter will say I've only had a bottle of soda-water!"

He laughed grimly at the thought, then noting the time he went into his bedroom and carefully washed out his glass.

He caught a reflection of himself in a mirror, and the sight gave him a start.

"My God," he said, "I've aged ten years in three days, and my head feels a bit unsteady. I must be careful. It would spoil everything if I were bowled over."

When a quarter to eight came, Leicester was ready for the advent of his chief supporters. He was faultlessly dressed, and he looked calm and dignified. He received the chairman of the meeting with grave courtesy, and after a few minutes' conversation he walked with them to the Public Hall, which was only a few yards away.

As may be imagined, the hall was crowded. Although the country had expected the Government either to resign or to dissolve for weeks past, the news of dissolution seemed sudden. The political fires were

lighted, and all the town was agog with excitement. People wanted to hear news first hand, and they imagined that Leicester would bring it. They also expected one of the brilliant speeches for which he was noted. Never before, they reflected, had such a chance been given him, and they felt sure that he would make the most of it. Therefore when the chairman, followed by Leicester and the leading magnates of the town, came upon the platform, the meeting rose *en masse*, and shouted until they were hoarse. The fight which they had so long desired had commenced, and the leader of the battle was before them.

Exactly as the clock struck eight the chairman rose. It was not his purpose, he said, to make a speech at that juncture. "He knew that every one was eager to hear their candidate, and that he would be committing an unpardonable sin if he stood between them and the speaker of the evening, and the hero of the fight. Nevertheless, there was an explanation he would like to give. As many of them knew, Mr. Leicester had expected to be married two days before, but owing to the sudden and severe illness of the bride the wedding had not taken place. Many men would have been prostrated by such a blow, but Mr. Leicester had risen above it. The call of duty had been louder than the voice of sorrow, and though he was naturally suffering great grief, he had risen above the grief, and was with them to fight their battles.

Of course this was received with tremendous applause. It appealed to young and old alike. There was something pathetic, as well as heroic, in their candidate overcoming his grief to be with them in their battles. As for Leicester, he sat unmoved amidst the shouts of

sympathy. To him it was bitter mockery, and ghastly tragedy ; but he mastered his feelings, and sat pale and motionless.

" Nevertheless," went on the chairman, " we have the sympathy and good wishes of the lady, whom we hoped would be with us in this fight. She is not with us in person, but she is with us in spirit, aye, and more than spirit, for——"

And here the agent's eye for dramatic effect came in. At that moment, the electric lights in the building were suddenly extinguished, and the picture of Olive Castlemaine was thrown on the canvas, which had been placed on the wall behind the platform.

Again there was a shout of enthusiasm. " Three cheers for the lady, and may she soon be well enough to be Mrs. Leicester," some one shouted.

The suggestion was taken up with a will. Cheer after cheer filled the hall, and Mr. Smith, the election agent, felt rather glad than the wedding had not come off. Her introduction in this way was worth more votes, he reflected, that if she had appeared in person. In truth, the face thrown upon the screen was sufficient to arouse the enthusiasm of any crowd. Olive Castlemaine had been very happy when that photograph had been taken. She had gone to the photographer's the day after Leicester had made his memorable speech, and she appeared at her best. Moreover, the photographer, and the maker of the slide, were to be congratulated. It was a fine picture. There was a smile upon her lips, the light of gladness was in her eyes, while the nobility of her face impressed all who saw it.

Almost without realising it, Leicester turned and

saw. He remembered accompanying her to the photographer's, and he recalled the happy day they had spent afterwards. Yes, this was the woman he had won—and lost. All the ghastly mockery of the business came to him as he beheld the beautiful woman who had sent him away from her home in scorn and anger. The shouts of the multitude maddened him. He wanted to rise and tell them that the whole thing was a shameful lie, a bitter mockery. But he sat still, looking and looking. Presently he became almost unconscious of the shouting crowd, in his consciousness of his hopeless misery, and wrecked hopes. Great God! what was this election to him now, when his heart was all torn and bleeding, and when, to forget everything, he had debauched himself in whisky! Never had he realised his loss more than he realised it then. She was his no longer, she had driven him from her because he had outraged her woman's pride, because he had made her the subject of a drunken jest.

In a moment all had changed again. The hall was ablaze with light, and the slide had been removed from the lantern. They were again brought back to the business of the meeting.

"And now," said the chairman, "I have pleasure, unbounded pleasure, in asking our brilliant candidate, who I am sure will be not only your future member, but in good time will occupy Cabinet rank in this country, to address you. Moreover, I want, in your name, to assure him that we are all anxious, not only to welcome him as our future member, but to tell him that we look forward to the time when we shall see him and his beautiful wife upon this platform."

The chairman was not possessed of a very sensitive nature, or he would not have uttered this last sentiment. Besides, he was carried away with the ardour of the meeting and the dignity of his own position.

As Leicester rose to speak he felt that his head was swimming, and he realised that his brain refused to fasten upon the things he wanted to say. The atmosphere of the ill-ventilated hall had now become stifling to a degree, and the whisky he had been drinking during the last two days was having its effect. As he had said, his long abstinence had made him more susceptible to its power, and he not only knew that he was drunk, but he also realised that others were in danger of knowing it as well.

He stood staring stupidly at the audience, as cheer followed cheer. At first a great dread filled his heart, only to be followed by a kind of idiotic mirth, over which he had no control. When he spoke it seemed to him that his voice was not his own; it sounded ludicrous in the extreme; it was like the babble of a senseless idiot, rather than that of a strong, self-contained man.

"Ladies and gen'l'men," he said, and felt himself rocking to and fro as he spoke, "I'm 'bliged to you, verr-y 'bliged to you, for the kind sen'iments you've 'spressed fr my beau'ful bride." Here he stopped; he felt that the people were looking towards him with wonder. He heard derisive laughter in the hall. He tried to think of something else to say, but his brain refused to act: the whisky had taken effect. The scenes through which he had passed and the stifling atmosphere of the room had mastered him. For the first time in his life he revealed the fact that he was

drunk. For several seconds he stood, staring at the people with lack-lustre eyes, and rocking to and fro in his helplessness.

"Ladies and gen'l'men," he hiccupped, "I've been drinking to her health t'day, and I b'leeve I'm lill bit drunk. Ne-er-less, I'll 'nde'vour to——"

He tried to speak further, but in vain; then, looking around the hall, he broke into a senseless laugh, and fell on the floor of the platform in a state of imbecility.

CHAPTER XIV

LEICESTER'S FAREWELL TO TAVITON

EVEN when this had taken place, the meeting scarcely realised the true condition of affairs. It is true that those belonging to the opposing side laughed derisively, but a number of Leicester's friends attributed his condition to the grief he felt for Miss Castlemaine's illness. Amidst the uproar and confusion of the meeting, a number of men on the platform lifted him up and carried him into an ante-room, where he lay back in an armchair and looked around him with drunken gravity. In the excitement of the moment, not only his friends, but his foes, came into the room. A local reporter for the opposition paper entered, and the editor, eager for spicy copy, followed him. They nudged each other with meaning glances, while whispers concerning the capital that must be made out of the event passed between them.

"We must send for a doctor," said Mr. Smith, his election agent, who saw as plainly as any one the true condition of affairs.

"Doctor!" laughed the local editor, "he doesn't want a doctor. He'll sleep it off all right. He's only drunk."

"Drunk!" said Leicester solemnly, "I'm sober as a

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judge. Word of honour, gentlemen. Overcome with 'motion, tha's whass marr w'me."

Both the reporter and the editor laughed ironically.

"We must get him back to the hotel," said Mr. Smith, "and we must have the doctor immediately."

"Yes, put him to bed at once," said the opposition editor. "He'll be all right in the morning, except for a bad headache."

"Bed," said Leicester, struggling with himself, "bed, who dare talk to me 'bout bed? I mus' do duty. Two thousand faithful s'porters are waitin' for word from thr leader. Hic! I must s'port my party also. 'Scuse me, gentlemen, I—I must return to th' platform. I want to warn my countrymen 'gainst the ter'ble evil 'v drink! No, nod ev'n sorr-ow shall keep me fr-om duty. Has ses poet, 'Whr duty calls or danger, O ner be wantin' there.'"

He tried to rise; but in vain. Again he fell back with a drunken giggle, while the editor and his reporter laughed gleefully.

"I hope you'll not take an unfair advantage of Mr. Leicester's illness, gentlemen," said Mr. Smith.

"I assure you we'll only report faithfully what we have seen," was the reply. "But, really, I don't think there is any need for newspaper reports, the people have seen for themselves."

With all speed Leicester was taken back to the hotel, protesting all the while that he wished to address his faithful followers, and warn them against the evils of drink. Presently, when he reached his room, he rang the bell.

"Boll whisky, James," he said. "Gen'l'men, le's drink 'elth party—sobriety 'n' freedom."

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"No, Mr. Leicester," said the chairman of the political organisation which had accepted him as their candidate, "you have drunk too much whisky already. You have not only disgraced yourself, but you've disgraced your party. You've ruined our chances of winning this election, you have made us the byword of our opponents, and of the country."

"Qui' m'stak'n, gen'l'men; sob'r's judge. Wha'! Rafford Lester drunk? I cu'nn be drunk if I tried. Whisky cu'nn do it. Le's 'ave a drink!"

A doctor entered the room, and came to his side.

"They say I'm drunk, doctor. Tell 'em wha' fools they are. Tell 'em I'm avocate ov temp'rance."

"Get him to bed," said the doctor. He had been a supporter of Leicester's, and was disgusted at what had taken place. "Here, take this," he said, pouring some liquid into a glass.

"Is it whisky, docke? No, thank you. I'm ple'ged t'totlerr. I never tush cursed stuff."

"Drink!" said the doctor sternly.

"Anything 'blige you, doctor," he said, as he swallowed the draught. A few minutes later he was in bed asleep, while the whole town was talking eagerly about what had taken place that night. Many there were, in spite of what they had seen, who maintained that his mind had been unhinged by grief, and that instead of turning their backs upon him, they must support him all the more loyally; but in the main it was believed that the opposition editor's dictum was correct, and that he had insulted them by appearing on the platform in a state of intoxication. As the night went on, reports were afloat to the effect that Miss Castlemaine was not ill at all, but that it was a

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report which originated with Leicester himself, the real truth being that Miss Castlemaine, having at the last moment discovered him to be a drunkard, had ordered him from her home. Before the town had gone to sleep, Leicester was declared to be guilty of every sin in the calendar, and that they must be very thankful that they had found out his real character. Mr. Smith and his staff were in despair, while the agent of the other candidate was jubilant. Their success was now assured, they felt.

Hour after hour Leicester slept. The doctor's potion, together with the whisky fumes, had to be slept off, and he lay like a log, breathing heavily. More than once the proprietor of the hotel came and looked at him. As he looked, he wondered. Even in his drunken sleep there was something noble about him. The face, all discoloured as it was, suggested a strong, masterful man. It seemed impossible that the self-restrained man who came to his house a few hours before, and had ordered nothing but soda-water from the waiter, could have fallen on the platform in drunken helplessness. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt about it. As he listened to his maudlin mutterings there could be but one opinion about his condition.

When Leicester woke daylight had come, but although he felt that something terrible had happened, he did not fully realise what had taken place. His mouth was dry and parched, and his head throbbed terribly. He had a vague remembrance of having acted strangely, but he could not piece together the scattered thoughts which floated through his brain.

"What is it?" he asked, after vainly thinking. "Am I still asleep? Is it all a nightmare?"

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He looked around the room, and saw the sun's rays streaming through the windows. No, he was not asleep, he was in the bedroom of his hotel. But why was he there? Why was his heart so heavy? Why did his head throb so terribly?

Slowly memory began to work: he remembered dimly the swaying crowds, the shouts of enthusiastic supporters. But it was all very vague, and it seemed a long way off. His tongue was dry and parched, it would hardly move in his mouth. He felt an all-devouring thirst.

"Whisky," he said, "I must have whisky!"

He moved to get out of bed; but as he did so, all the events of the past three days came to him as if in a flood. The wedding-day, the scorn of Olive Castlemaine, the black terror of hopeless darkness, the return to whisky, the dissolution of Parliament, the telegram summoning him to his constituency.

It all came to him with such a shock that for a moment his thirst left him. The scenes of the previous evening filled him with horror. Yes, he had been drinking hard all the day, and the whisky had proved too much for him. He had walked to the Public Hall all right; but the hot, fetid atmosphere, the sight of Olive Castlemaine's face thrown on the canvas had completely overmastered him. Had he not given up drinking whisky it would have been all right. He would have made his speech, and no one would have suspected that he had been drinking; but as it was he had become a maudlin fool, he had fallen down in drunken helplessness.

The thought stung him to madness. This, then, was his boasted strength; this was what Radford

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Leicester had come to. The warnings of the pious friends whom he had sneered at had come true. Whisky had made him as drunk as a navvy who had spent his week-end in debauchery on receiving his week's wage. Cynic as he had always been, even in his best hours, he had also been always a proud man. He had professed contempt for the men who had not been able to conquer the vices which disgraced them in the eyes of the world. This pride had checked him from the vulgar indulgence in sin, before he had met Olive Castlemaine. He had always acted and spoken as a gentleman, even when he had drunk enough whisky to make other men hopelessly incapable. However debauched he might have been by the habit which chained him, he had always dressed with scrupulous care, and he had never associated with those whom he regarded as low and debased.

But now all had come to an end. Directly after his dismissal by Olive Castlemaine he had cast all good resolutions to the winds, and as a consequence he was at that moment a laughing-stock to the town, to-morrow he would be an object of ridicule for the whole country. And Olive Castlemaine would know of it. Bridget Osborne would send the local newspaper to her, and she would read that——

What a thin veneer his so-called reformation was, and what a broken reed he was, in spite of all his boasted strength! He had been a poor thing whose moral elevation had depended on the smile of a woman, and when that smile was withdrawn, he had returned like a swine to its wallow!

But worse than all, there was the disgrace of it! Never before had he sacrificed his pride, never before

had he given any one the opportunity of saying that he did not retain a full possession of his faculties. He who had boasted that he had nerves of steel, and that no whisky ever distilled could make him drunk!

He leaped out of bed, and with trembling hands opened his portmanteau. Ah! there it was—a bottle of whisky. He pulled out the cork, and then hesitated. Was he so weak, then, as to return to the poison that had made him the byword of clodhoppers? The thought staggered him, and possibly he might have put it from him, had not the smell of the whisky reached him. This was like a match to a powder magazine. He took a deep drink, and he felt better.

"If I had only been careful it would never have happened," he reflected. "I wonder now if——"

He heard a knock at the door.

"Yes."

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"His name?"

"Mr. Grayburn, sir."

"Very well, tell him I'll be with him in a few minutes. Ask him to take a seat, will you, James?"

He spoke in his old voice. After all, the event of the previous evening was only an episode. He was not really altered; perhaps he would be able to put all things right even yet.

He determined that nothing should be left undone, on his part, to atone for the miserable past. He went to the bathroom, which adjoined his room, and plunged into cold water; after this he shaved himself, and then dressed with great care. When he appeared before Mr. Grayburn there were no traces of the events of the previous night. His nerves stood him in good stead

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again. He was never more quiet and composed in his life. Yet he felt like a man who had signed his own death warrant.

"Ah! good-morning, Mr. Grayburn."

"Good-morning, Mr. Leicester."

"Have you breakfasted? I see the man has set the table for one only, but that can soon be rectified."

"Thank you, I have breakfasted."

Mr. Grayburn spoke very quietly, but he was evidently ill at ease. Had Leicester appeared before him haggard and trembling, his work would have been easier. It seemed impossible to take the superior attitude towards Leicester as he appeared at that moment.

"I have come, Mr. Leicester at the request of the Executive Committee of our Political Association. As chairman of that committee, they thought I was the proper person. You will, of course, guess why."

Leicester was silent.

"The events of last night will, of course, make it impossible for you to again appear in the Division as a candidate."

"Excuse me," said Leicester; "but surely my illness of last night will not——"

"Illness!" interrupted Mr. Grayburn.

"Well, call it what you like. Say I was intoxicated. Is that enough to nullify all the work I have done in the constituency for the last three years?"

"The member for this Division must be a gentleman whose personal character is stainless," said Mr. Grayburn.

"It is true that many would excuse last night in view of your recent disappointment, but only a few. And even they would turn against you as soon as certain facts came to light."

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"What facts?"

"Facts which Mr. Osborne could reveal if he would. At present he simply characterises them as disgraceful."

Leicester still fought on grimly. Why, he hardly knew.

"I take it that even a political organisation will not be so mean as to believe a vague and unproved charge," he said.

"When it comes from a man like Mr. Osborne, yes."

Leicester laughed bitterly—his old cynical laugh.

"Oh! I see," he said, "the hero of one day is the criminal of the next. Of course, three years' service and hundreds of pounds spent go for nothing. Well, I might have expected it."

"One of the chief planks of our political platform is temperance reform," said Mr. Grayburn. "How can the people believe in your sincerity?"

Again Leicester laughed.

"If I were a brewer, and made a huge income out of the drink, I should be believed in," he said.

"Possibly, if you did not appear in——"

"Exactly. My great sin is, not that I drink whisky, but that I happened to drink it at the wrong time. Why, my dear fellow, I have seen you in this very room hilarious by the whisky you have drunk at my expense. I have heard you sing comic songs in most melodious tones, and I have had to send for a cab to take you home."

"But never in public," said Mr. Grayburn uneasily.

"Just so. I see my failing. Mr. Grayburn, allow me to congratulate you on your high moral standard. Drink as much as you like, only don't let any one know it."

"Look here, Mr. Leicester," said the other. "I am as sorry for this as any man, and if I only considered myself—well, things would be different. But I'm only one. There are these teetotalers to think of, and they are a strong party here. I tell you the people are mad with you ; if you appeared outside the hotel now, you'd be hooted. If you appeared at a meeting you'd be hissed off the platform ; nay, more, I don't believe you'd be safe to go into the streets. You'd be pelted with rotten eggs, and the refuse of the town."

He had stung Leicester at last. All the cheap veneer of cynicism was gone now, and he did not know what to say.

"Just look at this," went on Mr. Grayburn. "This is an account of last night's meeting, brought out by the editor of the opposition paper. It seems that he and the reporter got into the anteroom, and the reporter is a clever caricaturist in his way. Here you are in various attitudes : First, Mr. Leicester rising to address the meeting. Second, Mr. Leicester endeavouring to proceed. Third, Mr. Leicester finishing his speech. Fourth, Mr. Leicester in the anteroom. How could we stand by you in face of pictures like these ?"

As Leicester looked at the sheet which Mr. Grayburn exhibited, he realised the meaning of the other's words. Each picture showed him in a state of drunken helplessness, and under each picture was a quotation from what he had said, so spelt as to bear out the fact of his intoxication.

"Did I say this ?" he stammered.

"You did, Mr. Leicester ; that, and more."

He was silent for a moment, and then through the

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open windows of the room he heard shouting in the street.

"Wha'! Rafford Lester drunk! Cood'n be drunk. Sober 's judge. Friend o' temperance. Hooray for pardy sbriety!"

A shout of laughter followed, brutal, derisive, laughter, and he, Leicester, was the cause of it. He walked to the window and saw a crowd of people outside the hotel; they were looking towards him. No sooner did they see him than they began to shout and laugh derisively.

"You wish me to resign," he said quietly.

"My committee, which met this morning, asked me to wait on you for that purpose."

"Very well," he said. He seized a pen and wrote with a steady hand. "There," he said presently, "will that do?"

"Yes, that'll do perfectly. And believe me, Mr. Leicester, I am as sorry as any man. And you'll forgive me, but my advice to you is, get out of the town as quickly as you can. But don't leave by the Taviton Station. There'll be a crowd there to watch every train, and that crowd means to mob you."

"I'll see about that," said Leicester, his eyes flashing.

"Don't go to Taviton Station, Mr. Leicester. No doubt you could have the law on them afterwards; but it's no use fighting the rabble. They think you've lost them the election. My advice is, get a cab up quietly, and drive to West Billington, a little wayside station five miles away. From there you can get to London without coming through Taviton at all. I am awfully sorry, Mr. Leicester, but I am sure you understand my position."

Leicester wanted to shout in his anger—he longed to pour curses upon his visitor, upon the town, the election, upon every one. But he controlled himself.

"Good-morning," he said.

Mr. Grayburn held out his hand, but Leicester would not see it. When he had gone, he closed the door behind him, and sat down to think. His breakfast was untouched, a number of letters which lay on the table before him were unopened. What should he do? He did not notice the waiter who came to remove the breakfast which he had not eaten; he sat with closed eyes, thinking and brooding.

Presently he picked up a Bradshaw, and began to study it. Now and again he would lift his eyes and stare into vacancy, then he would turn eagerly to the time-table again, not to study the trains so much as the map of the various railway lines.

About midday he rang for some sandwiches, and asked the waiter to send the proprietor to him.

"I'm sorry for what has taken place, Mr. Leicester," that gentleman said when he came.

"Very creditable of you, Jenkins," he said; "meanwhile you can get me a carriage, and send me my bill."

"Yes, sir. Of course Mr. Grayburn told you I should have to get you out of the town on the sly. This I must say, though, since you sent in your resignation they are talking more kindly about you."

"How considerate of them! But that does not alter my plans. I wish to be driven to West Billington."

"Yes, sir. From there you return to London?"

"I don't know. I presume, moreover, that where I go is remarkably like my own business."

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"Exactly, sir. I was only thinking about your letters."

"You can burn them. I don't care. I want no letters. You send the carriage."

"If anybody inquires about you?"

"I believe you profess to be a very religious man, Jenkins, in spite of your calling. The teetotalers say your calling is to send people to hell. Well, I'll not be so explicit. Tell inquirers that I am gone to a region where fires are supposed to be very good."

"But, sir——"

"As I told you before, this seems remarkably like my own business; yours being to send my bill, and get a carriage."

"Yes, sir."

"And, by the way, Jenkins," added Leicester, with a joyless laugh, "excuse me for meddling. I suppose I can tell those whom you have sent to that place where I'm bound for, that you'll be on presently?"

Half an hour later he left the hotel in a close carriage, and drove to West Billington. It seemed to him that his career had ended now. He had left the town in disgrace. He had left by a backway, like a thief. Arrived at West Billington, he took a ticket for a station twenty miles away, among the Devonshire meadows. But he did not stop there. He did not alight from the train until it had arrived at a little lonely station among the wild moors. There he got out, and looked around. He was the only passenger who alighted, and the porter eyed him wonderingly.

"Want to git anywhere speshul, zur?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to find some old dame who has a room to spare in her cottage," he said.

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"Early fer fishin,' and laate fer shettin,' zur, be'ant 'ee? All th' zame, I d' knaw a plaace."

"Where?"

"My a'nt, zur, d' live two miles fr'm 'ere, over the moors. Purty lill plaace shee've got, ef you doan't mind et bein' quiet. Ef you'll wait ten minnits I'll go over weth 'ee. I shaan't be wanted fer a 'our or zo."

An hour later Leicester was sitting in a cottage parlour among the lonely Devonshire moors. The old lady had provided him with a simple meal, and the quietness of the place made him feel better. The day was now drawing to a close, and the evening shadows were falling.

"Will 'ee 'ave a lamp then, zur?" asked the old lady.

"Not yet," said Leicester; "I'm going out for a walk."

For an hour he tramped, until the day had gone.

"I must make up my mind," he said: "the old life is impossible now. What shall I do? Pull down the shutters, or shall I——?"

He entered the cottage again, and was met by the kindly presence of the old lady of the house.

CHAPTER XV

THE CYNIC AND THE COUNTRYWOMAN

RADFORD LEICESTER stayed at the cottage among the Devonshire moors for several days. A more lonely place could not be well imagined. The cottage itself stood in a little dell where trees grew, and a moorland stream babbled. Early spring flowers were to be seen there, and the smell of the bursting new life of bracken and heather and willow bush was sweet beyond words ; but the view from the cottage was such as one only finds in a moorland district. For miles nothing was to be seen but a wild waste of nearly uninhabited land. The few cottages were occupied by those who had reclaimed strips of waste land, and obtained a scanty living thereon. A month or two later the whole scene would be aglow with the bloom of furze and heather ; but now it was grim and grey and, under a cloudy sky, forbidding. But Leicester was not sorry for this. The countryside, the loneliness, fitted in with his mood. He felt that the past was destroyed, and that the things which were once possible to him had come to an end. What had the future for him ? What was he to do ? That was the question he had to face.

Immediately after he had realised that Olive Castle-

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maine was lost to him for ever, he had conceived wild schemes of revenge. He wanted to make Olive suffer as he had suffered ; he swore that he would humble her pride to the dust, and that he would win the wager which for the present had lost him the woman he had loved. But that was all over now. He had become degraded in the eyes of the nation. He had no respect for the morality of the political world ; but however low it might be, there was a kind of moral standard which people demanded in their representatives. They were not troubled because he had drunk too much, it was that he had become intoxicated at the wrong time. He had actually appeared on a public platform in a state of drunken imbecility. He had given the opponents of his party the whip hand, and he had in all probability lost his party the election. That was his sin, and it would take years for them to forget it.

Besides, he was not the kind of man to go back and plead forgiveness. His pride forbade him. What? He, Radford Leicester, who had laughed at these clodhoppers, go back cap in hand, and plead with them to take him back ! But what could he do ? What had the future for him ? That was the question he had to face. Hope gone, faith gone, purpose gone, while the old craving for whisky dogged him at every step, what was there for him to do ? Life was a mockery, a great haggard failure ! Why should he seek to prolong it ?

And so he spent his days amidst the loneliness of the moors, thinking and brooding. He saw no newspapers, received no letters, had no visitors. He had told the old lady who kept the cottage that he wanted a week or two's quiet, and freedom from the bustle of

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the world. Besides, he had a big problem to solve, and he had come there to solve it. He gave his name as Robert Baxter ; it was the first that came to his lips, and he spoke of himself as keenly interested in sociology. It happened that old Mrs. Sleeman had not the slightest idea what sociology meant, but she had had several gentlemen in the past who had come to lodge with her ; they had called themselves artists, and naturalists, and they had come pretty much in the same way as Leicester had come. They had been easy to please, they had paid her well, and when they had left had promised not only to come again, but to recommend her house to their friends. His advent therefore was quite welcome to her, and as he had no tastes that were difficult to satisfy, she hoped he would stay for a long while.

Mrs. Sleeman was a cheerful old lady who managed her house and her husband with great tact. It was also said that her influence was very great at the little Bible Christian chapel to which she went on Sundays. John Sleeman, her husband, was but little in evidence. He worked on his little farm patch through the day, and in the evenings spent his time in the little kitchen, which to Leicester was a sealed chamber.

No newspaper was brought into the cottage, and letters came rarely. Indeed, the postman never came at all. By mutual agreement it was arranged that when a letter came for Mr. Sleeman, it should be left at the house of Mrs. Maddern, who lived close to the high road. Occasionally Mr. and Mrs. Sleeman harnessed their little horse and drove to the market town, which lay several miles across the moors, but this was only on very rare occasions.

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As a consequence, therefore, Leicester's life was completely isolated. Day after day passed without any event happening to break the monotony of life, and he spent his time roaming over the moors trying as best he could to face the problem of his life, and to fight the despair which was gnawing at his heart.

He knew nothing of what was happening in the country; and he asked no questions. He was sick of the world, and sick of life. The great question was, what should he do? Should he commit suicide, and thus put an end to an existence which to him had no meaning or purpose, or should he go somewhere and begin anew? His nature, in spite of his beliefs, rebelled against the former. He could not bring himself, little as he cared for life, to destroy it by his own hand. As for the latter alternative, the old question reiterated itself, where should he go? what should he do?

He loathed the thought of going back to London, to live the life of a useless parasite amidst clubs and club loungers. The political door was closed against him, and even if it were not, he felt he could not enter it now. He had an income sufficient for all his needs, and as a consequence had no need to work for his living. It would have been better for him if he had. Humanly speaking, there are few better moral tonics than work.

Looming larger than all other questions was this: Had he for ever lost Olive Castlemaine? Had he won her only to lose her? But for the determination which in spite of his despair lay at the back of his mind, I imagine he would have put an end to an existence which at times became almost unbearable.

He was pondering over all these things for the

hundredth time one day as he was walking across the moors alone. The clouds hung heavily in the sky, while occasionally gusts of cold wind, accompanied by driving rain, reminded him that winter had not yet come to an end. As he walked and thought, a storm had gathered, and he saw that the sky threatened a downpour of rain.

"What do I care?" he laughed bitterly. "I feel like old King Lear. Nothing is wanting now but Tom Fool to make the picture complete. 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind!'"

The rain fell in torrents, and in spite of his wild mood, he made his way to a lonely farmhouse in order to find shelter. By the time he reached it, his clothes were soaked with rain.

He stood in a cart-shed, and watched the flood as it fell. The few trees that grew around the farmstead looked drear and forbidding; away in the distance the hills seemed to smoke.

"And this is life," he laughed. "We are born, we suffer, we make fools of ourselves, and we die."

And yet he knew it was not life as it might be. If he could have had Olive Castlemaine by his side, he could have been a happy man. But she had driven him from her presence, she had commanded him never to speak to her again.

"Won't 'ee come in by the vire, zur? You mus' be fine 'n' wet."

"Thank you," said Leicester, in reply to the invitation of the buxom farmer's wife. He entered the large farm kitchen, at one end of which a huge wood fire was burning.

"Why, you be fair streamin'," said the woman.

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"Zet cloas by the vire, and dry yerself. Do 'ee then. You'll catch yer death ef you doan't."

"Well, there'd be one less in the world," said Leicester, "and as the world is sufficiently populated, that would not matter."

"Fer shaame, zur. You be jokin'."

"I never joke," replied Leicester. "Still, if I die, there'd be the trouble of burying me, and that would be a pity."

"Fer shaame, I d' zay," said the kindly woman; "what would your mother zay, ef she 'eerd 'ee?"

"Haven't got a mother."

"Yer vather, then?"

"No father either," said Leicester. "If he were alive I'm inclined to think he'd say, 'Die, and have done with it.'"

"But you've got brothers, or sisters, or a wife, or a sweetheart?" She said this not so much for the sake of proving that he was in the wrong, but because, like the rest of her sex, especially those who live in lonely places, she desired to know something about this stranger.

Leicester shook his head.

"Well, you be in a bad way."

"Exactly," said Leicester, "I am." He yielded to a sudden impulse. "Now I put it to you, ma'am," he said, "suppose you had no friends, no one who cared for you; suppose you found the world a dirty sort of place, and found no pleasure in living, what would you do?"

"Do! I shud git somebody that ded care for me."

"I've tried, but failed."

"Ain't 'ee got a sweetheart, then?"

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"Not one."

"Is there no one that you do like?"

"Yes," he said, "but she's thrown me overboard."

"Gived 'ee the sack, you do main?"

"Exactly."

"Why then, zur, maakin' so bould?"

He was in a reckless mood, and in a way he could not understand, the buxom, kind-hearted woman led him to speak.

"Because I'm a bad 'un."

"Nonsense."

"Fact, I assure you. A right down bad 'un."

"And es she very good?"

"Terribly good, terribly proud, and terribly unfor-giving."

"And ded she give 'ee the sack 'cause you wos so bad?"

"More because I hurt her pride, I think."

"Ah, I zee."

"Come now, under these circumstances, what would you do?"

"I'd begin by bein' a good man, and laive the rest to God."

"God!" and Leicester laughed.

"Why, doan't 'ee believe in God?"

"I think I believe in the devil, if that's any good."

"Then, zur, I'd kill the devil."

"Can't; I love him too much."

"What, love the devil?"

"I hug him to my heart. He served me a nasty trick the other day, but I stick to him all the same. Yes, he's my only friend. He's nearly always with me. When I'm friendly with him, he helps me to forget

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All the same, I'm tired of him in a way. Now, then, w'at would you do?"

"The devil is allays our enemy, zur, allays. You must kill 'ee or you're done for."

The conversation was out of her depth, but she felt sure she was saying what was right.

"I'm inclined to think you are right," said Leicester, with a bitter laugh. "And yet I don't know. What do you think he's been persuading me to do this afternoon?"

"Summin' bad, you may depend, zur."

"I don't know. You know that big pool up among the moors. It has a kind of fascination for me, and the devil always meets me there. He is always telling me that it is very peaceful and quiet at the bottom of the pool."

"What, you d' main Crazzick Pool? It ain't got no bottom to et. Et's the devil's pool, tha's wot 'tes."

"Exactly. Well, he tempts me to walk into it, and sink, and sink, and find rest and peace."

"You doan't git no peace except in Christ, zur," said Mrs. Pethick, who was a class-leader among the Bible Christians.

Leicester looked at the dame's kindly face and wondered. Had this simple, homely, kindly-faced woman learned any secret unknown to him? To say the least, the question interested him.

"Look here," he said, "you don't mind speaking to a poor devil like I am quite honestly, do you? In fact, it's no use speaking to me at all, unless you do speak quite honestly, for I can detect a lie in a minute. Do you really believe that Christ does help you?"

"Do I believe et? I'm zure, zur. Why, when I'm

tempted to do wrong, to think of Christ do 'elp me. Whenever I d' 'ave bad, wicked thoughts, I d' jist think of Him, and they do go, zur. For zure they do."

"And He gives you peace, does He?" said Leicester half mockingly, half seriously.

"Iss, zur, 'e do fer zure. I wudden zay zo ef I wasn't zackly zure. A paice which I caan't git no other way. Why, when I be comin' home from class-mitten' by myzelf, I git feared zumtimes, when tes dark; for the way es loanly. But I d' talk weth Jesus oal the way, and then—well, zur, the loanly road ez vull of light."

The mocking laugh left Leicester's lips as she spoke: it was impossible to doubt what she said.

"But there," went on Mrs. Pethick, with all a woman's tact, "you be could and wisht, you be. I'll git a cup ov tay for 'ee, and zum bread and craim. You c'n jist raid the paaper while I be gone."

He sat down close by the roaring wood fire, and wondered. Why should this simple woman's faith be denied to him? He picked up the paper she had offered him; it was the first he had seen since he left Taviton. The first words he read were these: "New candidate selected for the Taviton division."

He read through the article with strange interest. It seemed to him as though it spoke of some one else. It referred to the unfortunate selection the party had made, but stated that their mistake had been rectified in the selection of a local man, whose career was known to all. "As for the man who has done the party so much harm," concluded the article, "we do not know what has become of him. He left the town in disgrace, since which time no one has seen him. Endeavours

have been made to trace his whereabouts, but in vain. Inquiries have been made at his old haunts in London, but no one has seen him there. It is a sad pity that a young man of such brilliant parts should end his career in such a way, but for our own part we may say that we are well rid of him. He brought no honour, or credit, either to our party or our county, and although some of his friends speak of him as having suicidal tendencies, we sincerely hope that he may repent of his past life, and begin anew in another country where he is unknown."

Leicester threw down the paper with a laugh. It was only the effusion of a local journalist who did not know the A B C of his trade, but it amused him.

"Begin a new life in another country where he is unknown." The words haunted him. Why not, after all? Perhaps—but the thoughts which flashed into his mind refused to take definite shape.

Mrs. Pethick brought him some tea and bread and cream.

"Ther' now, you be nearly dry now," she said; "zet up to the table, and 'ave zum tay. 'Twill do 'ee good, my dear."

Mrs. Pethick had spent her childhood in Cornwall, and had not forgotten some of the Cornish expressions.

"This is beautiful tea," said Leicester presently.

"Iss, ted'n zo bad. As Mrs. Maddern d' zay to me, 'Mrs. Pethick,' she do zay, 'nobody but you do buy the best tay.'"

"Mrs. Pethick," said Leicester, half quizzically, "do you believe the devil can be killed?"

"Not killed, ay dear, at laist not by we, but we c'n drive en away."

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"How, Mrs. Pethick?"

"Prayer, zur; prayer."

Leicester laughed.

"'Tes true, zur. Ther's 'ope fer the wust. As I zed to Franky Flew at the last revival, I zed, 'Franky,

'While the lamp holds out to burn,
The vilest sinner may return!'"

"And what then, Mrs. Pethick?"

"Why, then you become a new man, zur."

A little while later he left the house. Of course it was all nonsense, nevertheless the simple woman's talk made him better. The storm had now gone, and the moors were bathed in evening sunlight. It was a wonderful panorama which stretched out before him. The moors, which two hours before were dark and forbidding, were now wondrous in their beauty. And sunlight had done it all! Sunlight!

All through the evening he sat and thought. It seemed, from the look in his eyes, that a new purpose had come into his life. The next day he left his lonely lodgings, and found his way back to London. He went to a part of the city which was far away from his old haunts, and to which he was an utter stranger. No one recognised him, no one knew him in the little hotel to which he went. He gave his name as Robert Baxter, as he had given it to the old woman on the moors. Why he had come to London he knew not, except that a great longing had come into his heart to be again in the midst of the great surging life of the city. Nevertheless he stayed in his room at the hotel. After a pretence at eating, he picked up a newspaper. He glanced through it carelessly. He

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had lost interest in life. The reports concerning the General Election did not interest him. What mattered which set of puppets were at Westminster? The whole business was an empty mockery. Presently, however, a paragraph chained his attention :

"No news is yet to hand concerning the whereabouts of Mr. Radford Leicester. Many suppose that he has left the country, while some are afraid that the hints he dropped to the hotel proprietor at Taverton were serious."

He had no idea that the London newspapers would comment on his disappearance. He thought that he had dropped out of the life of the world, and that no one cared. Presently he read the remainder of the paragraph. Up to this time he had never thought of taking any particular trouble about hiding his identity. The matter of giving another name was mere acting on impulse.

He rang the bell, and ordered a cab. "It is lucky I remember his address," he said to himself, "lucky too that he is as silent as an oyster."

A little later he drove up to a house in one of the many quiet London squares. It was quite dark, and he had pulled the collar of his coat high up around his neck and face. No one recognised him as he entered, but when he walked into a dimly lit room, an old man said to him : "I knew it. You were not such a fool as to throw up the sponge."

After this Leicester talked to the old man for a long time. When he left the house, the light of purpose was in his eyes, although, had a close observer seen him, that observer would have said that there was also much doubt and irresolution.

CHAPTER XVI

A GRIM JOKE

A WEEK later Leicester was still in London. He had removed from the little hotel to which he had at first gone, and had taken a room in one of those old-fashioned enclosures which still remain in the heart of London. Here he fended for himself, the room being cleaned by an old deaf and nearly blind woman, who was glad to earn a few shillings a week in this way. He saw no one. Throughout the day he kept in his solitary chamber; he only went out at night, and then after the city had gone to sleep. What was in his mind it was difficult to say.

One night after midnight he went out alone. The theatres had all emptied themselves, and the streets, save for an occasional passer-by, were deserted. The lights still burned, but to him it looked like a city of the dead. The echoing footfalls which occasionally reached his ears sounded like the steps of some ghostly visitant rather than of a being of flesh and blood.

He presently came to the Law Courts, and walked in the direction of Ludgate Hill. The great buildings rose up stately and grand at his side, but they reminded him rather of a stupendous monument of the

dead than of a battle-ground where keen intellects and grave wisdom waged war.

"Justice," he thought. "What justice is there in the world? What do either judges, or barristers, or juries care about justice? The whole world stinks with lies and injustice and cruelty. And yet why do I prate about these things? What is justice? Is there any such thing? What are all our thoughts but blind gropings after a phantom?"

The moon shone clearly overhead, and the spring air was clear and sweet even in the heart of the city; nevertheless there was a cold bite in the wind which found its way across the open spaces.

"As though Anything cared?" he went on musing. "What does it matter whether one is good or bad, idle or industrious? Some work and some play, some are rich and some are poor. Well, what's the odds? We are only like gnats, born when the sun rises, and die when it goes down. The worst of it is that this beastly little race leaves others of the same species behind. And so the farce will go on, until the earth grows cold and the race dies. Well, and what then? Whether one dies young or old, what does it affect? Who cares? Nothing cares."

He looked up at the great dome of blue, and saw here and there a star.

"As though, if there is Anything at the back of all things, the Force which caused those worlds could care for a paltry little earthworm like I am!"

He laughed aloud, and then shuddered at the sound of his own voice. The city seemed like some huge phantom which had no real existence.

He turned into one of the many ways which lead

from Fleet Street to the river. If possible, it seemed more silent than ever here. The lights were less brilliant, life seemed to be extinct.

"Oh, what a coward, a poor whining coward I am," he said. "I think, and brood, and drink, and dream, and curse; but I do nothing. I, who used to boast of my will-power and my determination. I live like a rat in a hole; I dare not come out and show myself, and I dare not put an end to the dirty business called life, because I have a sort of haunting fear that I should not make an end of myself even although this carcase of mine should rot."

Presently he reached the Embankment, and he walked to the wall which bounded the river and looked over. The tide was going out. The dark, muddy river, carrying much of the refuse of London, rolled on towards the sea. Yet the waters gleamed bright, both in the light of the moon as well as in those of the lamps which stood by its banks, but the water was foul all the same, foul with the offal of a foul city. He turned away from it with a shudder.

"Why haven't I the pluck to take the plunge, instead of being the whining, drivelling idiot I am?" he cried. "Nothing cares, and nothing would happen—except nothingness."

He walked along the Embankment. "And yet I told her that I could be a man. After all, was she not right? What if she were unjust? Was such a creature as I am fit to be the husband of a pure woman? See the thing I have become in less than a month. Might I not, if I had married her, have become tired of my new rôle, and drifted? Well, if I had I should have dragged her with me. Did I really

love her? Did I not love myself all the time? It was not of her I thought. It was all of my miserable, sordid little self. Still, if there is an Almighty, He made a mistake in treating me so! But there, as though an Almighty cared about such as I. If He does, He regards us all as a part of a grim joke."

"I 'nt got a bit a bacca on yer, 'ave yer, guv'nor?"

A man rose from a seat as he spoke, and shivered. At the other end of the seat lay a woman asleep.

"I cawn't sleep, I'm so bloomin' cöld," went on the man, "and I'm just dyin' for a bit a bacca."

"Why do you try to sleep here?" asked Leicester.

"'Cause I in't got no weers else, guv'nor. That's why. Besides, my hinsides is empty, and yer cawn't sleep when yer empty. Tell yer, I'm fair sick on it."

"Why don't you make an end of it?"

"Wot yer mean?"

Leicester pointed to the river.

"Would for tuppence," said the man.

Leicester put his hand in his pocket and took out the first coin he felt. It was a two-shilling piece.

"Here's a dozen tuppences," he said; "now let's see if you've got the pluck."

The man snatched at the coin, examined it in the light of the lamp, and spat on it. Then he went to the woman and shook her.

"Cum on, Mord," he said.

"Weer?" said the woman sleepily.

"Daan ter ole Jerry's doss-aas."

"We cawn't; we in't got fo'pence."

"Yus, we 'as; a swell hev chucked me two bob. Cum on."

The woman rose and prepared to follow the man.

"But you told me——"

"That I'd do it for tuppence, but not fer two bob, guv'nor. Goo'-night, and thenk yer."

Leicester laughed. He had not expected the man to throw himself into the river; indeed, had he attempted it, he would most likely have stopped him; but he laughed all the same. Two shillings meant food and a warm place to lie, and the tramp clung to life.

"We are all such cowards," he said, as he walked on towards Blackfriars Bridge. The great space outside Blackfriars underground railway station was empty. Not a soul was to be seen. He crossed to the road at the end of the bridge, and stood at the top of the steps which led down to the river.

"I'll look at it closer," he said. "It'll be fun to stand and watch the dirty stuff sweep on to the sea."

He went down the granite steps which led to the river, and crept under the barrier that was placed half-way down. It felt much colder as he came close to the water, and the sudden roll of the river sounded awesome. A few steps from the bottom he stopped.

"If there was any good in living!" he said. "But there isn't. What lies before me? I am a hopeless, purposeless, whisky-sodden fool. There's nothing to live for."

He went nearer the river.

His attention was drawn to a shapeless something which the river had swept to the bottom step, and which, as the tide had receded, had left lying there. He went closer to it and examined it.

It was the dead body of a man.

He turned quickly and retraced his steps, and then stopped.

"He's had the pluck to do it," he muttered; "he must have thrown himself in farther up the river. The tide has washed him there and left him stranded. Poor beggar, I wonder who he is?"

He went down again and looked at the gruesome thing lying there. He lay in the shadow of the bridge, and the moon's rays did not reach him.

"I wonder who he is," repeated Leicester.

Almost mechanically, and with a steady hand, he struck a match and examined the body.

"It might have been me," he muttered. "About my own age and build. His clothes are good, too. I suppose this thing was what is called a gentleman." He laughed quietly and grimly. A sort of gruesome curiosity possessed him, and a wild fancy flashed into his mind. "I wonder if he's left any mark of his identity?" he said, whereupon he lit another match and made a closer examination. Yes, the thing's hands belonged to what was once a man of leisure. It is true they were discoloured and swollen, but they had been carefully manicured. Without a shudder he examined the pockets. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in them—not even a pocket-handkerchief. The shirt was fastened at the wrists by a pair of gold sleeve-links, but they bore no marks of any sort. He unfastened the links and looked at the inside of the cuffs, but there was no name written on them. He fastened them again. He examined the dead man's collar. Again it was without name. Evidently the suicide had taken trouble to leave no traces of his identity behind.

He took another look at the face. Yes, it might have been himself, if he had been in the water a long

time. It was the face of a young man, as far as he could judge, between thirty and forty. It was clean-shaven, too, just as his own was. It was true it was much distorted and discoloured; evidently the poor wretch had been in the water for days.

Almost mechanically he took out his handkerchief and wiped his hands. The light was bright enough to show him that his own name was in the corner.

"It might be me, it might be me," he repeated again and again.

There was a sort of fascination in the thought.

"If twenty-four hours ago, or forty-eight hours ago, I had thrown myself into the river, and ever since had been rolled about by the muddy waters, I should be like that, just like that. Only he is nameless; there are no means of identifying him. Well, what's the odds?"

He started, as though some one had struck him.

"Why shouldn't it be?"

In a moment he saw the possibilities of the thought.

"Yes, why shouldn't it? To-morrow morning some one will come down these steps, and then the police will take the poor wretch to a mortuary, after which there will be the usual fiasco of an inquest. As there are no marks by which to identify him, hosts of stupid questions will be asked. After that—he will be forgotten, unless some one comes to claim him. But why shouldn't I become——?"

His eyes flashed with a new light. He was no longer cold and calm. He was eager, excited.

He listened eagerly. All was silent, save for a rumbling noise which he heard some distance away. He felt his pockets carefully. Yes, here was an old letter; it would do perfectly. He soaked it in the

muddy waters of the river and crumpled it. It had the appearance of being in the river for days. He put the letter in the dead man's pocket.

Again he wiped his hands, and listened. Then he took the handkerchief he had used and dipped it in the river. It became saturated with the waters of the Thames. Yes, that would strengthen the chain of identity. He put the handkerchief in another pocket of the dead man's clothes. Was there anything else he needed to do? No. He had examined the poor wretch, and there was nothing on him by which it could be known who he was. Now, the mystery would be made clear. A letter addressed to Radford Leicester, Esq., was in his pocket; a handkerchief also bearing his name would be found on his person. He gave the body a parting glance and came up the steps.

"Poor beggar, I wonder who he is, after all?" he said. "Anyhow, if there is any secret to learn, the thing that was he has learned it. He had the pluck, I hadn't; but, after all, it has given me an idea."

By the time he reached the top step he was to all outward appearances calm again. For a moment he hesitated, and then walked up New Bridge Street.

A policeman passed him and gave him a suspicious glance, but, seeing a well-dressed, gentlemanly-looking man, said nothing.

"Good-nig' , constable."

"Good-night, sir; out late."

"Yes, rather." He was tempted to tell the man what he had seen, but did not yield to it. It was far better to say nothing. So they passed on, he towards Ludgate Circus, the policeman towards Blackfriars Bridge.

When he reached his solitary room he sat down and began to think. What he had done appeared to him in the light of a grim joke, and he wondered what the result of it would be. There was something intensely interesting in the thought of what would be said when the body was found on the following morning. He was in a strange humour, and the events of the night had fallen in with it. Ever since the day on which he had left Taviton he had desired to hide himself from those who had hitherto known him, and the feeling had grown as the days went by. Why should he who, according to the world's standards, had disgraced himself at Taviton, appear before the empty-headed gossiping crew he had known? He had played his old acquaintances a trick now. What would they say when they heard the news?

He thought of Olive Castlemaine. What would she say? Had she forgotten him? he wondered. No, no, that could not be. The woman who had cared enough about him to promise to be his wife could not forget him so easily.

Oh, but this was a joke, a joke he really enjoyed. Let all those who knew him be fooled! He laughed at the thought of it, and there was a sort of bitter pleasure in his heart as he went to bed.

The following day the old woman who swept his room and did odd jobs for him came in the ordinary way. She had not the slightest idea who he was. If some one told her that he was Radford Leicester, it would have meant nothing to her. She knew nothing, and cared just as little about the doings of the world. If she met him in the street she would not have recognised him; she was too blind.

"Want me any more to-day?" she asked as she was leaving.

"No—yes," said Leicester; "you might come about half-past six to-night. I may want you, and will you bring me an evening newspaper?"

"All right. Which? there's so many on 'em."

"Oh, it does not matter. Bring half a dozen. You can get them off the man who stands at the corner of the top of Chancery Lane."

"'L right," she said, taking the sixpence he gave her.

Throughout the rest of the day he sat alone, still thinking and brooding. When evening came he looked impatiently at his watch. He was anxious to see the evening newspapers.

The old woman did not come till seven o'clock.

"Here are the papers," she said; "anything you want me to do?"

"Yes, go out and buy a chop, and then bring it back and grill it."

The woman took the money for the chop, nodded, and went away without a word. Leicester opened one of the newspapers eagerly.

He had no need to search long for what he wanted to find. Almost the first paragraph which caught his eye was about himself. He laughed aloud as he read it. Truly, it was a grim joke.

"This morning, at early dawn, as a police constable was passing over Blackfriars Bridge, he looked over the parapet and saw something which appeared to him as a strange-looking object lying on one of the steps which lead down to the river. On going nearer, he found it was the body of a dead man, which to all

appearance had been in the river some time, and had been carried to the steps by the outgoing tide, and left stranded there. The constable whistled, and was immediately joined by two others. The body was taken to the —— mortuary. On examination, two proofs of the man's identity were found. The first was a letter, and the other a handkerchief bearing the deceased's name in the corner. But for these two things it would have been impossible to identify him, as the face is distorted and swollen beyond all recognition. It is with great regret that we have to state that both the letter and the handkerchief bore the name of Radford Leicester. Many of our readers will have known Mr. Radford Leicester by repute. After a brilliant career at Oxford, he eventually became Parliamentary candidate for Taviton, and many prophesied that his splendid abilities would take him high in the councils of the nation. He became engaged to a charming young lady of wealth and position, but although the wedding-day was fixed, the marriage never took place. Whatever the reason for this, it is believed that it unhinged the late gentleman's mind. Since the sad circumstances which took place in Taviton, and which were recorded in the daily press some time ago, Mr. Leicester has not been seen, and until the sad discovery of this morning, no one had any idea of his whereabouts. The deceased gentleman was a man of few friends, and until his engagement lived very much the life of a recluse. It is with great sorrow that we record the above, as it was fully hoped and believed that he would not only have a very distinguished future, but that he would have been of great value to his country."

Leicester threw down the paper.

"Good," he said ; " everything is turning out exactly as I thought."

He read the other papers, and found that each gave very nearly the same version. One moralised at some length on the sad end of the deceased, and enlarged on the evils of drinking.

It was a strange experience, this reading of his own obituary notices, but it agreed with his mood. He had not enjoyed himself so much for a long time.

He did not leave the house. He determined to do nothing which might shake any one's belief in the farce that was being played. He would see the mockery out to the bitter end. This was not long in coming. The inquest was held without delay, and the early impressions were confirmed. It was a case of circumstantial evidence. Radford Leicester had hinted at suicide to the proprietor of the Red Lion Hotel, Taviton. Since that time he had not been seen alive by any who had previously known him. He had also left Taviton in disgrace, his political career being blighted, while it was commonly believed that Miss Castlemaine had refused to marry him because she had discovered something disgraceful in his life. His drinking habits were known to many. Therefore, when a body was discovered, and on it two proofs of its identity, the jury could come to no other conclusion than they did.

Moreover, a strange coincidence took place at the inquest. The solicitor of Radford Leicester appeared, bearing a document signed by the said Radford Leicester, stating his desire that, in the event of his death, his property should be allowed to accumulate for ten years from the date of his decease,

and should then be given to Guy's Hospital. This solicitor was an old man of the name of Mr. Flipp, an exceedingly eccentric but a much respected member of the profession nevertheless.

Accordingly a verdict of suicide while in an unsound condition of mind was brought in; and orders were given that the body should be buried, the expenses to be paid out of the deceased gentleman's estate.

Leicester went to the funeral. Mr. Flipp was there, together with Winfield and two or three others with whom he had been on terms of intimacy. He had so disguised himself that no suspicion was aroused, and he stood quite near the grave when the service was read.

He could have laughed aloud. No grimmer joke was ever perpetrated. He looked curiously at the bystanders, and watched the expression on their faces. Mr. Flipp's face was as expressionless as that of the Sphinx. Winfield looked very thoughtful; the others seemed to pay but little heed.

"A product of heredity, environment, and hard lines," said Winfield to his companion as he accompanied him to the carriage.

"Poor old Leicester, I wonder where he is now?" said the other.

The carriage door closed, and a few seconds later no one but himself stood at the graveside, save the workmen who were filling in the grave.

"There's not much grief nor sentiment about the matter," said Leicester as he walked away. "Still, it's been an experience worth having. I fancy I am one of the very few men who have ever attended their own funeral in this fashion."

When he got outside the cemetery he passed by

a newsagent's shop, and noticed the placards on the board outside:

**"THE CURSE OF DRINK: SAD END OF A BRILLIANT
YOUNG POLITICIAN"**

He went in and bought the paper, which could best be described as a kind of religious police news. When he got back to his room he read the article, which had used him for its text.

"I'm of some value to the world anyhow," he said with a laugh. "I should not be surprised if sermons are not preached about me on Sunday. It would be worth while to find it out. But there, no one would preach a funeral sermon about me, although I must say I should like to hear one."

"I'm finished with London, finished with the world now," he continued presently. "From this time I'm a dead man. Radford Leicester committed suicide, has been 'sat upon' by a coroner and jury, and has been buried. After all, I'm glad he's not buried at the expense of the public. Henceforth Radford Leicester is no more. Some one else takes his place. Now I must carry my plans into effect."

CHAPTER XVII

HOW OLIVE RECEIVED THE NEWS

OLIVE CASTLEMAINE sat beneath a mimosa-tree in the garden of an hotel in Grasse in the south of France. Near her sat her father, who was diligently reading a French newspaper. They had been sitting thus for some time, neither speaking to the other. In spite of the sunshine, and the fresh winds which blew across the hills on which this French village was built, Olive looked pale and tired. Much of her old vivacity was gone. The sparkle had gone out of her eyes ; her abundant life had departed. She looked wistfully away towards Cannes, the fashionable town which lay several hundreds of feet lower, away by the shores of the Mediterranean ; then she glanced around the garden, and noted the almost tropical plants which grew in such abundance.

"Father, I want to get home," she said.

"You will have great difficulty in finding a more beautiful spot than this," said John Castlemaine.

"Yes, I know, but I cannot bear it any longer. I want to get back to work."

"You'll find it very hard to go back to the old scenes again ; besides, you know what gossips our neighbours are."

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"I do not see that that matters. I did a very cowardly thing in coming away."

"You did what I insisted on," replied her father.

"Yes, I know; but I ought to have insisted also."

"Yes, and—well, it has been bad enough here where we are unknown, but home at The Beeches—why, those newspaper reports would have driven us mad."

"They would have done nothing of the sort. If they had—well, it would not have mattered."

"You have not driven the fellow out of your mind yet."

"No," replied Olive.

"Then my advice is, do so. Why, think of those Taviton papers? To be drunk on a public platform; to allow your picture to be thrown on a screen, while he stammered out his drunken drivel. No wonder the people hooted him out of the town."

Olive was silent, although her face itched with pain.

"At any rate, I am glad he has the shame to go away into hiding. I saw by a paper yesterday that nothing is known of his whereabouts."

"Yes, I know."

"You saw it?"

Olive nodded.

"I hope we've seen the last of him."

She did not speak.

John Castlemaine turned, and saw Mr. Sackville coming towards them, bearing a packet of letters and newspapers.

"The post has just come in," said the minister, "and I took the liberty of bringing your letters and papers."

He laid them on an empty chair by Olive Castlemaine as he spoke, and then went on.

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"I must take the next train back to England."

"So soon?"

"Yes, there are two or three matters which require my immediate attention. You see—well, I came away somewhat suddenly, you know."

He was sorry he had spoken the moment the words escaped his lips, for he saw a look of pain shoot across Olive Castlemaine's face. But he had enough tact not to hurt her more by seeking to offer explanations.

"Nothing serious, I hope," said Mr. Castlemaine.

"My sister's husband has just died," he replied simply.

"Ah, I see, and your sister will need you. You have my deepest sympathy, my friend; if there is anything I can do to lighten her burden—or yours——"

"Thank you, Mr. Castlemaine, you are always very good."

"But you will remember what I have said?"

"Yes, thank you, I will remember; but at present she only needs me. You don't mind my hurrying away, do you? Good-bye."

"I shall go with you to the station," said Mr. Castlemaine. "You cannot leave for two hours yet."

"And I will go too," said Olive. "I am so sorry you are going, Mr. Sackville."

Her words were more than an empty convention, and the minister felt it. His heart had gone out with a great pity towards the girl whom he had baptized as a baby, whom he had romped with as a child, and whom he had received into the Church in after years. He loved her almost as much as John Castlemaine himself, and no one had sympathised with her more deeply than he.

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"Thank you, Olive," he said. "Do you know what I've been thinking about all the morning?"

The girl was silent.

"I am sure it's right," he said, "God never makes a mistake."

"But we do," replied Olive.

"Yes, but it's all right. I am not an easy-going optimist, as you know, and I don't see how what I have said can be true. But it is. It helps me to bear my own sorrow to say it. God bless you, my little girl."

He went back to the hotel, leaving father and daughter together. In spite of the sad news he brought, in spite of the fact of his going away, his words comforted her. There is always help in the words and presence of a good man.

"If I were sure I did right," she said presently.

"You could have done nothing else," said John Castlemaine.

She did not answer for some time, neither did she turn to the letters and papers which Mr. Sackville had laid by her side. She was thinking of the words which Leicester had spoken to her. She remembered how he had said that if there was a God, He had used her as a means of his salvation, and she wondered how much truth there was in what he had said. Even yet she did not understand her own heart; all she knew was that since she had read the letter which had destroyed her hopes, life had been a great pain. Anger, pride, disappointment, and love had each in their turn fought for the mastery, and her heart had seemed to be broken in the struggle.

"No," she said, "I suppose I could not."

"We see what his reformation was worth," said John Castlemaine. "Evidently he was playing you false all the time."

Olive was silent.

"Now honestly, Olive," said her father, "suppose you had a chance of altering the past, what would you do? Would you marry him?"

"No."

The word came from her lips before she knew she had uttered it. It seemed as though her heart spoke for her. John Castlemaine breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

"He was a bad, selfish, cynical man all the time, Olive," he said. "In no possible light was his conduct excusable. A drunkard I could have forgiven, if that were all, although you could never have married a drunkard——"

"No," said Olive quietly.

"But to—no, I will not repeat it. The man forfeited all right to respect."

"I want to get back home, father; I want to take up my work. I was a coward to come away; let us go back with Mr. Sackville."

"Impossible, my dear; still, I will not keep you here against your will. Perhaps to-morrow—but read your letters, Olive."

Almost mechanically she turned to her letters, and read them. They were of no importance, and she skimmed them carelessly. Then she unfastened the wrapper of one of the newspapers, and began to read. A minute later she uttered a cry of pain as it fell from her hands.

"What is it, my dear?"

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She did not speak ; but looked away with a stony stare towards the shining sea in the distance.

" Tell me, Olive, what is the matter ? "

She pointed to the newspaper.

" He is dead," she said.

A look, almost like relief, came into John Castlemaine's face, and he picked up the paper. As he read, a sensation, the like of which he had never felt before, came into his heart. The paragraph described the finding of Leicester's body on the steps by the side of the river near the Blackfriars pier. It discussed the causes which led to it, and pointed out that in all probability Leicester had committed suicide. It hinted that possibly he had fallen into the river while in a state of intoxication, but urged that the balance of evidence lay in the direction of suicide. It referred to his career at Oxford, his great intellectual gifts, and the hopes entertained by so many that he would rise high in the councils of the nation. The event at Taverton, however, had revealed the true state of affairs, and thus his tragic death added another victim to the list of those who had been destroyed by England's greatest curse.

When he had finished he turned to Olive. She was still looking towards the Mediterranean, but he knew that she saw nothing.

" You have nothing for which you can blame yourself, Olive," he said, " you could have done no other."

She did not speak.

" It was a sad day for us when he came into our lives," he continued. " I know what you feel, my darling. You are laying his death at your own door, but you are wrong. His end came through the vices

which made you do what you did. Evidently he was a drunkard all the time. He may have kept his vice in the background when he came to The Beeches, but—but—this was the inevitable result—of—all the rest."

"Father," she said, "would you mind leaving me alone for a little while, I want——"

But she did not finish the sentence. Almost mechanically she rose from her seat, picked up the bundle of newspapers, and went to the hotel, where she slowly climbed the stairs towards her bedroom. Perhaps, although the garden was deserted, its very publicity made it impossible for her to stay there. She wanted to be alone, where she could, in quietness, think out everything again. She forgot all about Mr. Sackville's departure, forgot almost where she was. She felt stunned, and yet in some respects her mind was more than ordinarily clear.

Leicester's death had brought a new and unexpected influence into her existence. While he was alive, while he showed his real nature by bandying her name at a public meeting, and by appearing before an audience in a state of intoxication, she felt that her conduct, in spite of a feeling which suggested remorse, was excusable; but now he was dead, all was different. Perhaps in a vague, dim sort of a way she had felt the possibility of his coming into her life again, although she had no definite consciousness of it, but now she realised that he was gone from her life, except as a memory. She pictured him lying on the cold steps beside the river; she thought of the feelings which must have been in his heart as he threw himself into its dark, turbid waters. It was very terrible; ghastly,

in fact. She did not consider who sent her the paper, her mind was absorbed in the fact it contained.

Presently she asked herself what would have happened if she had married him. Would this dread tragedy have been averted, and would she have been able, as he had said, to have led him to a noble manhood? Even then her heart had answered no. The reformation which she thought she had worked was only a mockery; even if it had been real, it was only a veneer of reformation, so thin that it had failed him when she refused to hold further intercourse with him. She wondered whether she really loved him, else why could she think of his death so calmly? Her heart was very sore, and she felt stunned by the news of his death, yet she was able to think quite clearly and collectedly.

She read the paragraph concerning Leicester again. She supposed that there could be no doubt that it was he. The name upon the handkerchief, the letter addressed to him—no, there could be no doubt. Perhaps in a day or so the English newspapers would contain further news about him. There would, of course, be an inquest, and then the circumstantial evidence would be tested; but of course he was dead.

Suddenly the remembrance of their last interview came back to her. He had reminded her of her promise never to marry another man, no matter what might happen. She remembered the reply she had made, too. It was as bitter and as cruel as she could make it, and she called to mind the look on his face when she had spoken. Nevertheless she *had* promised never to marry another man. But it did not matter. She would never want to marry; the thought of such

a thing was repugnant. She wished she could cry, but her eyes were dry ; she wished she had some feeling of tenderness in her heart ; but she had none. She was cold and calm ; indeed, she seemed to be past feeling. If she felt anything at all, it was anger. Even yet she was angry that her picture had been exhibited at the political meeting at Taviton, and that she should be spoken about by a man who a few minutes afterwards fell on the platform in drunken helplessness. Why was it ? Surely Leicester's death should have destroyed any such feelings. He had atoned now for all he had done.

A minute later a knock came to the door, and she heard her father's voice.

"Olive, may I come in ?"

"Yes, father ; what is it ?"

John Castlemaine came in, and she saw the moment he entered that he had something of importance to tell her.

"When would you like to go back to England, Olive ?" he said.

"I don't know," she said. Somehow her interest in returning home had evaporated since the news of Leicester's death.

"I don't mean to The Beeches, Olive."

"Where, then ?"

He sat down beside her, and took a letter from his pocket.

"As you know, Olive, I have little by little taken a less active part in business."

"Yes," she said.

"And I'm tired of London. The eternal fogs and grey skies of the winter oppress me. For years I've longed to live in the country. Even at The Beeches

we are more and more invaded by the London fogs. Besides, there is no necessity for me to live near London any longer. I have quite as much money as I need, and, added to this, I have been able to trust more and more in the heads of the various departments of my business. An occasional visit will be quite enough for me."

"Well, father?"

"Well, some little time ago a fine old estate in Devonshire fell into the market."

"In Devonshire!"

"Yes, about thirty miles from Taverton. I did not speak to you about it, because I wished to surprise you. I instructed a man to make an offer for it; but owing to some hitch, the affair was not settled, and I was informed that it had passed into other hands. I was awfully disappointed because—because—well, Olive, I wanted to give it to you for a wedding present, and then invite myself as your perpetual guest."

Olive did not speak.

"When matters turned out as they did, I was almost glad that I had not bought it; but among the letters which Mr. Sackville brought down to us a little while ago was this."

He handed her a letter as he spoke. As she read, a look of interest came into her eyes, which her father noted with pleasure.

"It is a beautiful place," went on John Castlemaine, "and situated in the loveliest part of Devonshire. The house stands high, and the climate, so I am told, is the finest in England. The neighbourhood has been frequently recommended by the doctors for its healthfulness."

In spite of herself she was interested.

"You have visited it, have you, father?" she said.

"Yes, I spent two days there some time ago. In its way, the estate is unique. It is very large, and most of the land is very fertile; but there is a large tract of moorland, where there is some very fine shooting. The late owner neglected it terribly. There is a large village which is very squalid, and wretched. You see, neither the squire nor the parson cared for it. The former refused to spend a penny on the estate, while the latter—well, he belongs to that class which is happily growing less and less in the English Church—that class which cares far more about fox-hunting than his parish work. As a consequence the people have become drunken, thriftless, godless."

"But I thought the Free Churches were strong in Devonshire. Is there no village chapel?"

John Castlemaine shook his head.

"The late squire owned the parish, and would not allow a chapel to be built. If any of the people were to go to a dissenting chapel—well, I need not go on. I only mention the fact to show you that there is need for the influence of such a girl as you, Olive. Would you not like to be Lady Bountiful in a Devonshire village, Olive?"

Evidently the thought was pleasant to her, and her father rejoiced that he was able to distract her mind from her trouble.

"You have not bought the place, father?"

"No, but a telegram from me will settle the matter. It all depends on you, Olive. As you know, I did not like the thought of going back to The Beeches, neither for your sake nor mine."

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"But we could not go there to live at once, father?"

"There need be but little delay. The late owner has only lately died, and left the estate so mortgaged that the heirs cannot afford to live there. They are anxious, moreover, that all the furniture of the house shall be bought with the estate. Of course it will need some amount of overhauling, but it should not take long. If I were to send a telegram to-day, the place would be ours by to-morrow; then if we waited here a week or so, we could go back and take up residence there. Of course you would want to alter a lot of things, but a few days in London would be sufficient for you to select all the things you wanted."

"Suppose I were to say yes, and then were to get tired of it?" she said.

"I don't think you would, Olive; but even if you did, it would be a very good investment."

"Would you sell The Beeches?" she asked.

"Not at present; you see I should like to keep a place near London."

She thought a minute, and as she thought the picture of the old Devonshire home became more and more pleasant. The idea of going back to a London suburb became less and less pleasant, while the thought of an old house situated amongst broad parks, and rich pasture lands which stretched away to the moors, and the sea, grew upon her.

"Send the telegram, father," she said.

"That's right, Olive," said John Castlemaine as he left the room.

"I can't realise it, I can't realise it," she said when he was gone. "It is all so strange, so terribly strange. Even now I can't feel that he is dead."

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Later, however, her doubts were removed. Papers came containing the reports of the inquest, and then of the funeral. Radford Leicester was dead, and thus gone out of her life for ever.

"I am glad I've been able to buy that place," said John Castlemaine to himself as he watched her face. "She'll be able to forget him amidst new scenes; besides, she's eager to work among the poor in the village."

A few days later they started for their new home.

CHAPTER XVIII

OLIVE'S LIFE IN DEVONSHIRE

BY the middle of May John Castlemaine and his daughter had settled at Vale Linden, an old family mansion situated amidst beautiful and romantic scenery. Even Devonshire, the garden of England, had no more attractive place to offer. From the front of the house Olive could see a wide panorama of beautiful country. Immediately beyond the lawns stretched the park, dotted with giant trees, such as can be seen only in the southern and western counties of England. Beyond the park was a fine undulating country of wooded dells and rich pasture land. Here and there she could see the farmsteads nestling amongst the trees, while still beyond was the vast stretch of the moors, fast becoming a great blaze of golden and purple glory. Everywhere the birds sang gaily, while the air was filled with the perfume of flowers.

Spring comes early in Devonshire. Ofttimes when the air is cold and biting in the more northern counties it is balmy and caressing there. Not that it lacks the crisp vitalising elements which are supposed to belong to the north. There is no air in England more invigorating than that which sweeps across Dartmoor, and yet you feel that all nature is generous and kind

there. During the first few weeks of Olive's residence in her new home, it was a constant revelation of new wonders. Day by day she wandered along the lanes, and through the fields, almost unconsciously revelling in the unfolding life around her. Primroses simply bedecked the hedges, while the whole countryside was ablaze with wild-flowers. She heard the ploughboys singing in the fields, and watched the lambs sporting in the meadows; she listened to the River Linden singing its way into the sea, and breathed the air of healthful restfulness which pervaded the whole countryside.

John Castlemaine had acted wisely in buying Vale Linden. Knowing his daughter's beauty-loving nature, he had been right in believing that if anything could divert Olive's mind from her sorrow, it would be to place her in surroundings like these. It seemed almost providential that the post which brought news of Leicester's death also brought him the letter telling him that Vale Linden was still for sale, and as he watched the good effect that the place was having upon her, he rejoiced that he was a rich man, and thus able to obtain what would have been impossible to one who was poor. Not that John Castlemaine was blind to the sense of his responsibilities as a rich man. He used his money wisely and well, and while he did not appear before the public gaze as a philanthropist, few men worked harder to use his money in order to minister to the needs of humanity than he. He never advertised himself in the newspapers, nevertheless he regarded himself as a steward of the Almighty, and used his money accordingly. In buying Vale Linden, therefore, while he was anxious to please and help his daughter, he was not forgetful

of his duties towards those who lived on the estate. Indeed, he felt sure that it would not only be in the new scenes, but in the new duties which would appear to Olive, that she would find that healing which she needed.

Nevertheless for the first few weeks he rejoiced to see her revelling in the beauties of the countryside. Often he accompanied her on her walks, and went with her into the farmhouses, where she chatted with the farmers' wives. He climbed with her to Linden Tor, from which they could see the wide expanse of the moors; he sat with her in wooded dells, and listened to the song of the birds, and the rill of the river.

"You are pleased with Vale Linden, Olive?" he said to her one day.

"You know, father," she replied.

"And you can be happy here?"

"I think so; I hope so—presently," she replied.

"But not yet?"

She was silent.

"We must get some friends down here, Olive. You must have girls of your own age to stay here. It must be a bit lonely for you only having me."

"No," she said, "I am not lonely, and I want no friends—yet. I want to be quiet for a little while—presently——"

"Presently you will want them?"

"No, I think not, father, and yet I don't know. Yes, perhaps I shall. Besides, I think we ought. But it was not of that I was thinking."

"I daresay the people around here will be calling soon."

"No, I do not think so."

"Why?"

"Well, you see, the farmers will not dare to call; they will think it presumptuous. As for the county people, they will not think it incumbent upon them to do so."

"No?"

"Two things will stand in the way of their doing so. First, you are what they call a dissenter, and that would be sufficient to ostracise us; and, second, they would regard us as of the *nouveau riche* order, because you have made your wealth by commerce."

John Castlemaine laughed.

"I do not imagine we shall be much poorer because of their lack of courtesy, Olive; still, I hope you are mistaken."

"Why, do you long for their society?"

"Oh, no; I was only hoping that broader and healthier ideas were coming into the community."

"I am afraid it is a vain hope," said Olive. "Why, just think. When the vicar called the other day he was simply stunned when you told him you were a Nonconformist, while when you told him that you intended building a chapel, I thought he was going to faint."

"Yes, he did seem overwhelmed," said John Castlemaine.

"Before you told him these things, he spoke of his wife and daughters calling, but not afterwards. Neither, as a matter of fact, have they called."

"Ah, but that is because of pure chagrin, I imagine. Besides, Mr. Lestrangle is noted for his bigotry, and is not therefore a fair sample."

"Of course there is an utterly different atmosphere

here," said Olive. "Not that it troubles me. The people whose intellectual outlook is so limited that the question of religious opinion influences social courtesies, are not very desirable companions. Still, we will have to bear it in mind in considering our future. As for—by the way, are you very rich, father?"

"Yes," said John Castlemaine quietly; "I suppose I am."

"That question will be inquired into, no doubt," said Olive, "and it may be that in time the minor county families will overlook our other failings on account of your being a wealthy man."

"Aren't you a bit cynical, Olive?"

"I was only wondering whether these people were worth considering, father. As you know, I don't care a little bit about what is called society, and I have been thinking about other plans for the future."

"What plans?"

"I have been trying to think what I shall do with my life."

"Yes?" said John Castlemaine eagerly.

"Yes. We cannot live here for ever idly; at least, I cannot. Besides, it would not be right. Even if we were to take part in the social life of the county, I could not content myself to be a mere butterfly. Following the hounds, going to dances, paying calls, and the rest of it, is not a very interesting programme."

"No, it is not," John Castlemaine assented.

"I love the country," said Olive, "far more than I love the city, and—and I want to live in the country. Besides, there is as much work to do here as there is in the city. Of another kind, perhaps, but just as important."

"I think so, too; but what do you propose doing?"

"We have some responsibility towards the people here. Especially those on the estate you have bought. As it is very large, that will involve a great deal of work."

John Castlemaine nodded.

"But that is not all. I should like the house to be—well, a kind of centre of life."

"That sounds very well; but tell me what you mean in greater detail. Would you invite the villagers to it? Would you give them dinners, and dances?"

"Perhaps so, but I was not thinking of that so much. As a rule, people build great houses for purely selfish purposes. They invite people whose presence will give them pleasure. They give dinners to those who live in a land of plenty, they offer pleasure to those who are satiated with it."

"Exactly," said John Castlemaine; "what then?"

"I think we could invite to our house those whom we could really benefit by inviting."

"Start a sort of hotel for poor people. I am afraid it would not do, Olive. They would be miserable amidst such surroundings."

"There are many people we know who would not be miserable, and to whom we should be rendering real kindness by inviting. In this way we could be using this great house for the good of needy people. There are young professional men, ministers, doctors, and the like who are very poor, and yet who are people of refined and cultured tastes. An invitation here would be a perfect godsend to them, and at the same time we should be meeting people who are our equals in the best sense of the word."

"Yes," said John Castlemaine, "there is Dr. Rickard's daughter, whom you used to invite to The Beeches. A fortnight here would be like paradise to the girl."

"There are hosts of such. But more than that, father; I think it is possible to help those who might not be happy as our guests in the house, or for that matter whom we might not like to have there."

"Well, what would you do for those?"

"I would choose one of the loveliest spots on the estate, and build a large house, fitting it up on the lines of a good hotel. I would make it open to those to whom it might possibly be a kind of health resort."

"Would you admit them gratis?" asked Mr. Castlemaine with a smile, "or would they have to pay, like ordinary residents in an hotel?"

"I think they should pay; but their payment should be so arranged that while no one should be pauperised, no one, whom it might be desirable to receive, should be kept out because of money considerations."

Again the keen man of business smiled.

"And what would you do with them when you got them here, Olive?" he asked.

"Well, as I said, the place should be fitted up on the lines of an hotel or hydro, so that there should be plenty of opportunities for indoor amusement."

"Yes, but this is essentially an outdoor place."

"Exactly, therefore you should have tennis courts, a cricket field, and, what is more, golf links."

John Castlemaine lifted his eyebrows.

"Have you any idea what this would cost, Olive?" he asked.

"Yes, I have a pretty shrewd suspicion; but, as you told me just now, you are a rich man, and no one has

the right to either hoard up money or to spend it entirely on one's self. Besides, there is a tract of moorland just behind Hillhead Farm which, when laid out, would make a perfect golf links. There I think a club house should be built."

"Would you allow intoxicants to be sold?" asked John Castlemaine, and he was sorry he had asked the question the moment it had escaped his lips. He knew it made her think of Leicester, and brought up many painful memories. She did not speak for a few seconds, but presently she answered quietly:

"No, father, and if the estate were mine, not a single public-house should exist on it."

"Have you finished sketching your plans yet?" asked John Castlemaine.

"No, not yet," was the reply. "I would build a little church, and a village hall. The parish church here is in a moribund condition, and the services, owing to the vicar being out of harmony with the times, are neither interesting nor inspiring. Among your guests you will have ministers of all denominations. Many of these will be broad-minded, cultured men, and these will be perfectly willing to conduct services. Thus not only the visitors to the place, but the villagers also, will be privileged with healthful religious teaching."

"But even then you would meet the needs of only a part of your visitors. Many belonging to the State Church would come, we should hope."

"They would have the parish church; besides, I said I would have ministers of all denominations to conduct the services in the church you will build, so that the needs of people belonging to every section of the Christian Church should be met."

"The Roman Catholics?"

"If they care to avail themselves of it."

John Castlemaine laughed quietly.

"You have large ideas, Olive," he said, "but such a scheme as you mention would need an indefatigable secretary, one who would give a great deal of time and labour to it."

"I would see to that, father."

"What! do you mean that you would superintend the whole affair?"

"Yes."

Mr. Castlemaine looked at her steadily.

"I do not say your scheme is impossible, Olive," he said.

"It would cost a great deal of money; but that fact should not stand in the way. I can see, too, that no man should own such a place as this, and then selfishly reserve it all to himself. What is more, I feel sure that you could make it a great success, in the best sense of the word; but I see one almost insurmountable difficulty."

"And that?"

"Well, to begin with, such an affair should have one controlling hand, one controlling mind. While yours was the controlling hand, and the controlling mind, all would be well; but presently you would not be able to give the necessary time and attention, and then the thing would become a matter of committeeism, and paid secretaryism, which would be utterly out of accord with my ideas."

"But why should I not continue to give the necessary amount of time and attention?"

"Well, for example, you might get married."

Her face became as pale as death.

"I shall never marry," she said.

"Nonsense!"

"I shall never marry," she repeated.

"You do not mean that you regard yourself as bound by that mad promise to Leicester?"

She was silent, but she nodded her head in assent.

"But, Olive, this would be madness. The man is dead—a suicide. Even although the promise were valid had he lived, it has no meaning now he is dead."

"Yes, it has," she said.

An angry look shot from John Castlemaine's eyes. The girl's determination was so absurd that he had difficulty in keeping himself from speaking impatiently. He kept silence, however. He reflected that the tragic death of Leicester was so recent, that Olive's mind was in a morbid condition.

"Anyhow, I'll think over what you say, Olive," he said kindly. "I imagine, moreover, that I shall do what you say. Even if the scheme fails, it will be a splendid failure, and I do not think it will land us either in the workhouse or the bankruptcy court."

A few weeks later Olive was busy examining architects' plans, listening to professional golfers' ideas concerning the best way of laying out golf links, and hearing protests from certain in the parish concerning her wild, utopian, and unpractical scheme. Difficulties, however, did not turn her aside from her purpose, and in her arduous labours she was led to brood less over the tragic cloud which had fallen upon her life.

A year later a great change came over Vale. Linden The little wayside station some three miles away, which had been seldom used, became quite busy. The hills and vales, which had been well-nigh forsaken, echoed

to the laughter of many voices. Tired, overworked men and women found health and recreation amongst the wild moors, and roaming amidst wooded dells, while many who, amidst the crowded thoroughfares of London, found little to rejoice in, felt that their youth was renewed as they filled their lungs with the balmy air of Devon.

The great house at Vale Linden, which during the late ownership never received a guest, save those of a select class, was now often filled with people they would have called plebeian; nevertheless, it had never since its erection been such a centre of hospitality and gladness as now.

The new homestead was filled almost as soon as it was opened, while in the new church, which John Castlemaine had built, people who had listened to no preacher but the prosy vicar, rejoiced in the thoughts of men who had a real message to deliver, while those who had lived their lives amidst turmoil and strife felt that their spiritual and intellectual needs were met, in this quaint Devonshire village, "far from the madding crowd."

And Olive Castlemaine was the presiding genius everywhere. It was she who arranged for competitions on the golf links, and matches in the tennis courts. No concert or lecture at the village hall seemed to be complete without her. The ministers who came to the little church declared that but for the organ which she played, and the choir she trained, they would find it far more difficult to preach, while the vicar of the parish sorrowed with a great sorrow that such a beautiful and accomplished girl should be a dissenter.

Nevertheless, he could not deny that a new life was lived by the people. Books which the villagers had

never heard of before were now read eagerly, while drunkenness was becoming more and more a thing of the past.

Thus Olive Castlemaine entered upon a new phase of her life. In the midst of her many new duties she tried to forget the one who crossed the pathway of her life, and then had suddenly left it. Not that she altogether succeeded. Often in her quiet hours the picture of this man as she had first seen him came back to her. Again she saw the pale face, and the straight, erect form, while the memory of his cynical and faithless words haunted her. Even yet she could not help admiring him. No matter who might be in the room, his was the most striking figure; no one, in spite of his cynicism, had been listened to as eagerly as he. Even while she grew angry at the thought of his waging to win her as his wife, she wondered whether she had done right in driving him away. She knew that he had been drunk when he had done it, knew, too, that within a few weeks of the wedding he had confessed that he was marrying her to win his wager, and to participate in her father's wealth. No, she could not have done otherwise. Her self-respect, her woman's pride would not have allowed her; moreover, his professions of reformation were only a part of his plan for deceiving her. Within three days of the time when he should have married her, he had, while drunk, allowed her picture to be exhibited before a crowd of gaping rustics; he had uttered maudlin words about her, and then fallen on the platform in a condition of drunken imbecility. No, she had done right, and yet she felt sure that he must have loved her. Besides, in spite of his vices, he was a noteworthy man. There was some-

thing fine even in his cynicism, something almost noble in his scorn for conventional morality.

Still, it was all over. He had paid for his vices and his deceit with his own life. He had preferred to die in the turbid waters of the Thames to living a life of uselessness and regret. She ought to forget him; but she could not. Sometimes she upbraided herself for being the cause of his death; but not often. She was too healthy-minded, too sane for that. The man who could throw away his life because of what she had done, could never have been one whom she could respect.

Her solace was in work, in living for the benefit of others, and to this she gave her life. Little by little, as the leading families of the county came to know her, they paid her many attentions. Instinctively they realised that she was no ordinary woman, while her father's great wealth added charm to her accomplishments. Before two years had passed away more than one county magnate had sought her hand in marriage, while many wondered at her evident determination to remain single.

But as the years passed away her father thought he saw a change in her. She no longer grew impatient when he spoke to her of marriage, and he hoped with a great hope that his old age might be cheered by the shouts of children's voices, and by the thought that his only child had buried a dead past.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN WITH THE FEZ

OLIVE CASTLEMAINE sat on the lawn of her Devonshire home, looking away across the valley towards the moorlands which lay beyond. By her side stood a young fellow of from thirty to thirty-five years of age.

"You don't say you are sorry for me, Miss Castlemaine," he said.

"You are not on my side, you see," she replied, with a smile.

"Would that make a difference? Would you have congratulated me if I were on your side, and won the seat?"

"And if you had lost it—if you had made a good fight."

"You believe in fighting?"

"To the very end."

"Still, I can't turn my coat—even for you," he said apologetically.

"I would not like you to."

"And, after all, the battle's not lost, because of one defeat."

"You are going to stand again?"

"Yes, I am going to stand again. We must have

a General Election in a year or two ; meanwhile I shall keep on pegging away. The majority was not insurmountable. The Government is bound to make a fool of itself, the General Election will come, and I shall win the seat."

"You seem very certain."

"The man who keeps pegging away, and never gives up, has always reason to be certain. And I never give up."

Olive was silent.

"Don't you believe in that attitude?" he asked.

"Yes—in a way. Still, I should make sure I was not striving after an impossibility."

"Everything that has ever been done worth the doing,—I mean every really great thing—has been done by attempting the impossible."

Olive turned towards him with a glance that did not lack admiration. He was a fine-looking young fellow ; tall, well formed, and well favoured. He belonged to that class which maintains the best traditions of the old county families. He was the owner of an estate which lay contiguous to that of John Castlemaine, and he was a healthy-minded, clear-brained young Englishman. In many things the two were opposed. His sympathies were, in the main, with the classes ; hers with the people ; he had but little belief in the democracy, she had. He believed in the aristocracy of birth ; she in the aristocracy of intellect and personal worth. Not that he was not interested in the well-being of the people—he was ; but their ideas as to the way in which that well-being would be realised were different. His mind had been shaped and coloured by the class among which he had been reared, by the

atmosphere in which he had lived, and the atmosphere of this Devonshire squire's home was different from that which had surrounded Olive Castlemaine's life.

"No," he went on presently, "I never believe in giving up. That is a characteristic of my race. The Briarfields have always been noted for their—obstinacy."

"It is not always a pleasant characteristic," she said with a laugh.

"But a useful one," he said. "It has saved me from defeat more than once. When I first went to a public school I fought a boy bigger than myself. He whipped me badly; but I mastered him in the end."

There was no boastfulness in the way he spoke; moreover, he evidently had a reason for leading the conversation into this channel.

"That is one reason why I refuse to take 'No' from you," he continued. "I never loved any other woman; I never shall; and I shall never give up hope of winning you."

"Really, I am very sorry for this, Mr. Briarfield."

"Don't say that, Miss Castlemaine. I suppose it is bad policy to expose my hand in this way; nevertheless what I tell you is true. Although you first refused me three years ago, I shall never give up hoping that I shall win you, and never give up trying."

"Had we not better change the subject?" she said rather coldly, although there was no look of anger or resentment in her eyes.

"I only wanted to tell you this. It is more than a year since I spoke to you last, and I wished you to know that I have not altered—never shall alter. I love you, and I shall not give up hope of winning you. I know I am not of your way of thinking. To be

perfectly frank, I interpret the duties and responsibilities of a landholder differently from you. But I admire you all the same. No doubt you have given a great deal of pleasure by keeping an open house ; no doubt, too, your home of rest for a jaded multitude is very fine, but then I have old-fashioned ideas."

Olive laughed gaily. She had almost enjoyed the criticisms which, during the past five years, had been passed upon her work.

"At any rate the house was never used in such a way before," she said.

"Never," said Herbert Briarfield. "The late owner—well, he did not believe in using his home as a sort of hydro, or convalescent establishment."

"No," said Olive, "I suppose he did not, but then one has one's duties."

"Yes, but duty is a word which is interpreted differently by different people. For my own part, I do not see why one should open one's house to everybody. Of course, it is not my business, but don't you think you fulfilled your duty when you built your home of rest?"

"No," said Olive. "The Home of Rest, as you call it, is for strangers, but those I invite here are people I have known. They come here as my personal friends."

"You must have a lot of personal friends."

"I have, and really these last few years have been a revelation to me. I never realised the number of over-worked gentlefolk there were, neither did I ever dream of the amount of gratitude there is in the world."

"And do you mean to continue doing this—this—kind of thing, Miss Castlemaine?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What, when you get married?"

"I shall never marry."

Herbert Briarfield looked at her steadily. For the last three years he had been a suitor for Olive Castlemaine's hand, and although she had given him no encouragement, he had never given up hope that he would one day win her. Moreover, so certain was he that he would one day succeed, that he had almost unconsciously assumed a kind of proprietary right over her.

"Of course you will marry," he said, "and then you will think differently. Your first duties then will be to your husband—and to—to your position."

Olive Castlemaine did not reply. He had so often expressed this kind of sentiment, that she did not think it worth while.

"Miss Castlemaine," continued Herbert Briarfield, "you will not be offended if I speak plainly, will you?"

"I am not likely to be offended with my friends, Mr. Briarfield," she said, "but there is one subject that should be debarred. You know very well that I have made up my mind."

"Let no subject be debarred, Miss Castlemaine. It is not right that it should be. If there were some one else, of course I should have to regard your refusal as inevitable. But there is no one else—is there?"

Olive Castlemaine did not speak, but there was a look in her eyes which, had Herbert Briarfield seen, he would have thought it wise to be silent.

"We are neither of us children," he went on; "I am thirty-six, and therefore not ignorant of the world. I know that you have had many offers of marriage, and

"I—I know that the man to whom you were once engaged is dead."

He felt he was acting like a fool while he was speaking, but the words escaped him, in spite of himself.

"But you are not going to allow that to wreck your life," he went on. "You are young—and—and you know how beautiful you are. Besides, I love you ; love you like my own life. You are the only woman in the world to me. I do not know the—the story of that business, but—but surely—oh, Olive, you cannot allow such an episode—the fact that a worthless fellow committed suicide—to close your heart to me for ever. Oh, Olive, do have a little pity on me !"

Her first feeling as he spoke was of anger, but this was followed by pity. She had always thought of him with kindness. In many respects he was a fine young fellow, and was beloved in the neighbourhood ; thus the fact of his love could not be altogether unpleasant.

"Mr. Briarfield," she said, "really I am very sorry for this ; but let me say once and for all——"

"No, no, not now. Give me another three months—let me speak to you again then. In the meanwhile think it all out again, Olive."

"It is no use, Mr. Briarfield. I am not one to alter my mind easily."

"But there is no one else, is there ?"

"No."

"Then let me speak to you again in three months' time. May I ?"

"But my answer will be the same as now."

"No, it will not. You will let me speak again then, won't you ?"

"And you'll accept what I say then as final ?"

"If you wish it. That is, if you'll promise me one thing."

"Tell me what it is."

"That if you refuse me at the end of three months, and then if you alter your mind afterwards, you'll let me know."

"Yes, I promise that. But mind, after that you are not to speak to me, that is, on this subject, till I tell you."

"Yes, I promise that."

Herbert Briarfield turned away from Olive as he spoke, and walked to the end of the lawn. There could be no doubt that he was deeply in earnest. A look of fierce determination shone from his eyes, and his hands clenched and unclenched nervously.

"She must, she must," he said. "There is no one else, and I *will* win her."

He returned to her presently and, drawing a chair near hers, sat down by her side.

"I suppose your Home of Rest is full," he said, with seeming carelessness.

"Yes," she said: "had it been twice as large it would have been filled. As for the golf links, they are always popular. You see, while it is foggy and miserable in London, it is perfect weather here. Just fancy, we are only in the middle of April, and yet we are sitting out of doors in perfect comfort. It's as warm as June."

"There is a mixed crew down there," said Briarfield, nodding in the direction of what he had called "the Home of Rest."

"Yes?"

"Yes. It is a good thing you are so cosmopolitan

in your views. I dropped in there last night, and had a talk with a German and a Frenchman, while I saw, sitting in the smoking-room, an Arab of some sort. At any rate, he wore a fez."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I did not speak to him, as he seemed in a rather unsociable mood; but the German told me he was a remarkable sort of character. It seems he has spent most of his life away in Africa, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Desert of Sahara, I think."

"What led him to come here?"

"Heaven only knows. Why did the German and the Frenchman come? I suppose they heard of the presiding genius of the home, of its beautiful surroundings, and its healthful climate. Besides, in addition to its cheapness, all sorts of stories are afloat about the place. You know that."

Olive laughed.

"I heard only yesterday," went on Briarfield, "that you built it on account of a dream you had when a child; while some time ago some one told me that you had loved some youth some years ago, who had died of consumption, because of the want of a home of rest like this."

Olive laughed again.

"I have been there very little lately," she said. "I've had so many other things to do."

"Yes, but I think they all hope to see you. This German told me that the man with the fez is a fatalist, and does not believe in right or wrong. He's a striking-looking fellow, and would be noticed in any crowd. He's only been there two days, but is quite a centre of interest."

"Indeed," said Olive ; "what is he like ? "

"I did not see him standing, but I should judge he's of more than ordinary height. He has an intensely black beard, which he allows to grow long. His face is very much tanned, and thus he has quite an Oriental appearance."

"How old is he ? "

"Oh, I should think quite forty-five. But, for that matter, he might be any age. As I said, I did not hear him speak, but the fellow suggests all sorts of mysteries. There's a look in his eyes which tells wonderful things. He might be an esoteric Buddhist, or a Mohammedan who has dwelt much in Mecca. The fellow makes one think of reincarnation, and spirit wanderings, and magic—in fact, anything that is mysterious. The German told me he had a conversation with him."

"In what language ? "

"In German. It seems that he speaks all the languages. The Frenchman told me he spoke French like a Parisian, while the German says his knowledge of German literature is profound. He talks to the waiters in English, and reads the newspapers of several countries. When I saw him he was writing in Arabic."

"Do you know Arabic ? "

"No ; but from what I could judge from the distance, he was writing in Arabic characters. But it might have been in Chinese, or any other language ; I don't know."

"Do you know his name ? "

"Yes ; the fellow so interested me that I inquired."

"What was it ? "

"Signor Ricordo."

"Ricordo? That sounds Italian."

"He may be Italian. I suppose lots of Italians go across to Tunis from Genoa. He might be anything, in fact—Russian, Spaniard, Italian, or Arab."

"I suppose he is a gentleman?"

"As I told you, I never spoke to him; but the German told me that there could be no doubt but that he was a man of considerable position. He thinks him a count, or something of that sort; but, as I told him, Italian counts are cheap. Be that as it may, he speaks of himself as a simple 'Signore,' and makes no parade of his greatness whatever."

"That may be because he has none."

"But I should gather that he has. This German is a man who knows things, and he tells me that there can be no doubt but that Signor Ricordo has moved in the most influential circles. Oh, I can assure you there is no difficulty in believing it. You cannot look at his face without feeling that he is a man who has lived at the heart of things."

"You make me quite curious. I must visit the home, and make his acquaintance."

"It will be very interesting to know what you think of him."

"Of course he is not rich? He would not go to The Homestead if he were."

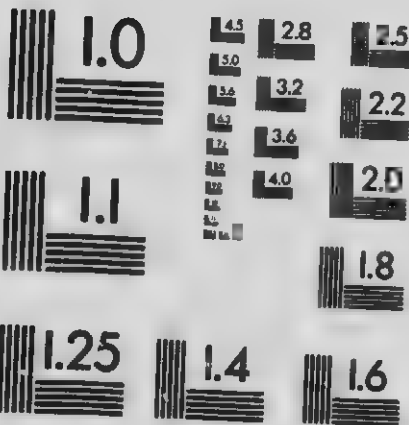
"The question did not come up. The truth is, he is not the kind of man who suggests such things. You are impressed by the personality of the man, not by his belongings."

"I wonder you did not try and make his acquaintance."



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"I wanted to badly ; but, as I said, he seemed to be in an unsociable mood."

"I daresay you will speak to him some time."

"Oh, yes. I am going in there to-night to dine with my German acquaintance."

Olive raised her eyebrows

"Oh, yes, I know of what you are thinking. You are saying to yourself that I am false to my creed by dining with a stranger, in order to see a man who may have been a donkey-boy in Cairo ; but if I have made you curious by talking about him, what must I be, who have seen him ? "

"You have accepted the invitation of the German, then, in order to get an introduction to Signor Ricordo ? "

"Exactly. I know I am not courteous to my German host, but it is the truth. Besides, to give your Home of Rest its due, they do things very well there."

"Thank you," said Olive, with a laugh. "I am always pleased when I give my customers satisfaction."

A little later Herbert Briarfield left Vale Linden and rode back to his home.

"How much she must have loved the fellow after all ! " he said to himself. "It must be six years at least since he threw up the sponge, and yet she remains true to his memory. I cannot understand it. Of course one doesn't know all that happened ; yet how could she give the fellow up because he was such a cur, and then refuse to marry any one else because he committed suicide ? "

During the afternoon he rode out to see some off-farms, and then came back to dress for dinner. "What

an idea to build such a place!" he said as the carriage rolled along. "Still, I suppose a wilful woman must have her way."

Herr Trübner, the German, met him with a great show of politeness, and did the honours of the dinner with much effusion.

"You know the patroness of this establishment?" he said presently.

"Yes, I know her," replied Briarfield, rather ungraciously.

"I have hoped to see her," said Herr Trübner, "but up to now I have been unsuccessful. And yet I was told she came here constantly. It was one of the things which induced me to come. So beautiful, so generous, so pious, I could not resist the desire to see her."

"It is possible you may be disappointed," said Briarfield. He was rather angry that the woman he hoped to marry should be talked about in such a way.

"Oh, no, I shall not be disappointed," replied the German. "Only half an hour ago I was told that while I was out walking with Signor Ricordo she was down here, and that she had arranged for a concert to be held in two evenings from now. Ah, and I love music! I who am from the country of Handel and Strauss, and Schubert and Wagner, I love it! I may be a poor, broken-down old German, but I love it, as I love all things beautiful."

"Is it not rather strange that your friend Signor Ricordo, who is a rich man, should have come to a place which was built—well, not as a money-making concern?" said Briarfield rather brutally.

"Is he rich?" asked the German.

"I thought you told me he was a man of considerable position."

"And what then, Mr. Briarfield? A man may be poor, and still be a gentleman. I am poor—but I do not say it to boast—I am of the best families in Germany. My mother was a Von Finkelstein, while the Trübners are of the best blood in my country. Ah, yes!"

"I am sure I beg your pardon. But I do not see Signor Ricordo."

"Ah, but he is here in The Homestead. Yes, I like that name. It makes me think of Germany, that word 'homestead.' That is why we Germans and you English are a great people. No nation can have the feeling so strongly that they are obliged to have the word 'home' without being a great people. The French with their *chez vous*, and the Italians with their *casa sua*, are poor, not only in their language, but in that sublime quality which makes a people invent the word 'home.' Forgive me for being prosy; but I like to think that the Germans and the English are akin. But what was I saying? Oh, yes, Signor Ricordo is in The Homestead, and he is looking forward to meeting you. When I told him that you knew our patron saint, he became interested, and asked that he might have the honour of being introduced. Have you finished? That is well. We will have our coffee brought into the smoking-room."

As Herbert Briarfield walked behind Herr Trübner into the smoking-room, he asked himself why he had been so foolish as to accept the latter's invitation to dine. He knew that Olive had built the place with an idea of charity, and although he had no doubt that

Herr Trübner was of a good German family, he did not relish dining with a number of impecunious people. As he entered, however, he no longer regretted that he had come, for, sitting in the corner of the room, he saw the man who had aroused his interest so strongly the night before, and whom he had really come to see.

CHAPTER XX

HERBERT BRIARFIELD AND THE STRANGER

SIGNOR RICORDO rose as Herr Trübner and Herbert Briarfield came up to him. As he did so, the latter noticed that he was of more than ordinary height, and that he was evidently a man of great muscular strength. But he quickly forgot the stranger's physical proportions as he realised that peculiar quality in the man's presence, to indicate which no better word can be used than "personality." Had he been asked afterwards to describe him, he would not have dwelt upon his physical appearance at all, except only in so far as it suggested that subtle power which made him remarkable. For he was remarkable. Before he spoke a word, Briarfield felt it. It was not that his face told him anything. The chin and the mouth were covered by a thick black beard and moustache, while the forehead was hidden from him by the Turkish fez which he wore. Nevertheless, the face was one which he knew he should never forget. The stranger's eyes were large, but they were seldom opened wide, because of his peculiar habit of half closing them. In the lamplight they looked black, but they might easily be any other colour. Moreover, the protruding forehead threw them in a shadow. His skin was much

tanned, as though he had lived his life beneath a tropical sun ; his large nervous hands were also almost as brown as an Indian's. There was nothing Oriental in his attire, excepting his fez, and yet he suggested the East. Even the voice was different from the English voice. It was, if one may use the terms, more subtle, more fluid. Moreover, he seldom raised his voice ; even when he was deeply interested, he never showed his interest by eagerness or loudness of speech. His hearers felt it, rather than heard or saw it.

No one would have spoken of him as a talkative man, and yet he spoke freely—at least, he seemed to ; nevertheless, even while he was speaking, Herbert Briarfield was wondering what he was really thinking.

"The life here must be somewhat strange to you, Signor Ricordo," said Briarfield, after their coffee was brought

"In what way ?"

The question seemed natural, and yet, while he spoke in low tones, it suggested a kind of anger.

"Herr Trübner tells me you have spent your life in the East. I do not know much about the East, but I have called at Tunis, and have spent a few days in Cairo. It therefore struck me that to one who has lived his life there, a Devonshire village must seem strange."

"Did it never occur to you, Mr. Briarfield"—he uttered the name hesitatingly, as though he were not certain about the exact pronunciation—"that the differences which one sees in various parts of the world all lie on the surface ?"

"No, I cannot say that. From what I have seen, they are deep."

"How deep?"

"Of course, it is impossible to calculate that."

"I do not think so. What is the covering of the world here? Mud. Yes, call it another name if you like; but it is still mud. Of course, it is very useful; it grows food. Away in Africa the world is covered in many places by sand; but it is only another form of mud. Grind it sufficiently fine, and it becomes slime—mud. But we must not grumble; it grows food. It is not exactly the same as you have here; but its qualities are similar. It goes to making blood, and bone, and sinew. Essentially, it is the same; superficially only, it is different."

"But I was thinking of men and women. The characteristics of the people who live near the Nile are different from those of us living here in England."

"Again, how deep is the difference?"

"I am afraid I do not quite follow you."

"And yet the thought is very simple. The sand of Sahara, of Libya is different from your Devonshire soil. Just so; but, as I said, it grows food. It contains the same vital elements. The Arab is different from the Englishman; yes, but how deep is the difference? His skin is darker, true; he conveys his thoughts by different sounds, true. Even his thoughts may on the surface be different; but dig down deep, and you find the same elemental characteristics. The Eastern eats and sleeps, so does an Englishman. The Eastern loves and hates, so does an Englishman. The Eastern ponders over life's mysteries and wonders about the great unknown, so does the Englishman. In a less degree, I will admit, but he does. Pull aside the tawdry excrescences, Mr. Briarfield, and all places are alike, all men

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are alike. All men, all climes, all ages tell the same story."

"And the story? What is it?" asked Briarfield.

"Ah, I will not try and put that into words."

"Why?"

"It's not worth while."

Briarfield was silent for a moment; he was not quite sure whether the man was in earnest or not.

"Have you been in England long?" he asked presently.

"Three months."

"In what part, if I may ask?"

"London."

"And you like London?"

"Yes—no—London is hell."

He spoke quietly, yet there was a strange intensity in his tones.

"Pardon me," he went on after a moment's hesitation, "I do not particularise when I say that London is hell. It only appears more like hell than other places, because there are more people there."

"You are alluding to the east of London?"

"And to the west. To the east most, perhaps, because the people are more real there. There is less artificiality, less veneer. The nearer to real life you get, the nearer to hell. And yet I don't know; the same fires burn in the west, although they are more carefully hidden from view."

"You have visited other parts of England?"

"Yes, visited."

"And how did the other parts strike you?"

"Still hell, but duller."

Herbert Briarfield looked towards Signor Ricordo

with a kind of nervous laugh. Even yet he did not know how to regard him.

"I agree with your—what do you call him?—Dr. Johnson. When he was asked where he would rather live in the summer, he said, 'On the whole, London.' 'And where in the winter?' asked his questioner. 'Ah, in winter,' he said, 'there is no place else. Yes, London is interesting.'"

"What impressed you most in London?" asked Briarfield, for want of a better question.

Ricordo hesitated a second.

"The friendliness of the waiters, I think," he replied. All three burst out laughing.

"Good," said Herr Trübner. "Ah, it is true, true. A man walks London streets and never meets a friend; but let him go into a restaurant, and the waiters take him into their confidence immediately."

"And did you visit our national institutions while in London?"

"Yes, I worked very hard. I saw everything. East, west, north, south, I went everywhere—everywhere. I wanted to see, to understand."

"And your impressions?"

"Ah, Mr. Briarfield, you ask a big question. Where shall I begin?"

"Well, which interested you most, the east or the west?"

"The east."

"Why?"

"Because the people are so much happier."

"You are joking."

"I speak only as an observer, of course, but I speak as I saw. I went to the places of amusement, I

watched the people's faces. In the west I paid half a guinea for a seat ; I sat amidst gaudy surroundings. Around me were over-fed men and under-dressed women. During the entertainment they sat coldly critical, mildly amused. It was with difficulty they suppressed their yawns ; the applause was faint. In the east I paid sixpence for my seat. The people were the toilers of the city ; but ah ! they enjoyed. Signore, they enjoyed. They laughed, they shouted, they applauded. It did me good to hear them. I dined in your fashionable West-end hotels, where rare wines were provided, and where rich men pay thousands a year to a chef gifted in the art of utilising people's palates. The diners grumbled with their food, their wines. I also dined in Whitechapel. I spent eightpence for my dinner. Ah, you should have seen the people eat there ! Even those who were poorest, and who had only their—what do you call them?—their bloaters, their tripe and onions, their black puddings—ah, but they enjoyed those things far more than your fashionable diners at the Savoy ! Oh yes, I went everywhere. I went to the churches, the chapels. Again the same difference struck me. In the east, there was a sense of reality ; but in the west—ah, Great Allah ! forgive me ! ”

“ Then you would rather live in the east ? ”

“ Yes and no, Signor Briarfield. Yes, because, in spite of poverty and wretchedness, I saw more of what we call happiness in the East End ; no, because, although the people seemed happy, to me it was hell. The sights, the smells, the sounds ! Still, if I were given to pity, I should pity your people who live in Mayfair, rather than those at Stepney.”

" You went to the House of Commons ? "

" I went everywhere. "

" And you saw——? "

" The puppets—yes. It was very amusing—very. "

" What amused you most ? "

" The pretence at being in earnest, I think. But the machinery was too plain to enjoy it really. They do things better at the theatres. There the players pretend to be puppets, but convince you that they are real. At Westminster, the players pretend they are real, but convince you that they are puppets. After all, your House of Commons did me good. "

" How ? "

" It gave me a sort of faith in human nature, in the simplicity of the people who send the actors there. It proves that the people of England are more fools than knaves. But it amused me vastly. No, Mr. Briarfield, your Dr. Johnson was right. If one must live in England, I should say London is the best place in the summer ; while in the winter there is no place else. "

" One wonders, what led you to this out-of-the-way place, then ? "

" I wanted to be quiet. London is a maelstrom, from which I got out with difficulty, but I did get out. Then I said, ' Let me be quiet, let me think. ' Then I met a man who had been here, and who said it was the most beautiful place in England. Moreover, he told me a romantic story about the lady who reigns here. And we Easterns love romance. So I came. I have not seen the beautiful lady yet. Do you know her ? "

" Yes. I know her. "

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"Ah. I should like to hear about her. Will you tell me what she is like?"

"I am afraid I have not your gift of description, Signor Ricordo."

The man with the fez looked at Briarfield steadily out of his half-opened eyes, but not a muscle of his face moved. What he thought, it was impossible to tell, but that he drew his own conclusions was evident.

"I have been told that she is very gifted, very beautiful, very pious," he said.

"You speak our language well," said Briarfield; "but for a slight foreign intonation, I should take you for an Englishman."

"Allah forbid!" he cried, lifting his hands beseechingly.

"You would not like to be an Englishman?"

"If I must be of one country, yes. But I am of no country. If you have a country, you have responsibilities, duties, prejudices."

"And you are without these?"

"Would you have me assume them?"

"Without them no man lives his full life."

"With them he becomes narrow, insular, and what your poet calls 'cribbed, cabined, and confined.'"

"They are the necessary limitations of our humanity."

"Does not that depend on the purpose for which a man lives, signore? Besides, there are things which happen to some men which say to them, 'Messieurs, you are without country, without father, mother, friends, and responsibilities, and therefore without prejudices; live your lives in your own way.'"

"That is impossible, Signor Ricordo."

"And why?"

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"A man is always responsible to the humanity of which he forms a part, he is responsible to the God who made him."

"Always to the latter, not always to the former."

"You believe in God, then?"

The stranger was silent a moment. An expression shot across his face which suggested pain.

"A man might be what you call an atheist in London, Signor Briarfield," he said, "with the grey, leaden sky, its long lines of streets, and its myriads of men and women crawling over each other like ants on an ant-hill; but in the East, amidst the great silences—no, a man must believe in God there. The sun by day, and the moon and stars by night, with the great silence brooding over him—great God, yes!"

Briarfield was struck dumb by the quiet intensity of his words.

"This is a man who has suffered," he thought; but he said aloud, after an awkward silence, "You are a Mohammedan, I suppose, signore?"

"I," replied the other, "I am nothing, signore, and I am everything—Christian, Mohammedan, Brahmin, what you will. I believe in them all, because all postulate a devil."

"You believe in a devil, then?"

"Have I not lived in London? Ay, and in Morocco also. But above all, I have lived!"

Had some men said this, there would be something theatrical, melodramatic in his words, but the stranger spoke so quietly that the others never thought of it.

"But here I rest," he went on, "here is quietness, peace. A good lady has been moved to build a Home of Rest for tired men, and I am tired. You have not

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told me about this lady, Mr. Briarfield. She is a great philanthropist, I suppose?"

"She is very kind to the poor," replied the young squire.

"And I am poor; I am in her Home of Rest. It is an experience. The place is like heaven after London: therefore I owe a debt of gratitude to my benefactress. Yes, and when I see her I will tell her so. But tell me, why did she build this place?"

"I know of nothing except what the world knows. She was anxious to befriend those whom such a place as this would help, so she built it. She also keeps the house at Vale Linden open; that is, she invites all sorts of people there as her guests. She has been a Lady Bountiful to the district."

"Distributes tracts, and all that?"

"I do not know. She has never given me one."

"She is simply one of these 'viewy' women, then?"

"She must have views, certainly, else she would not have done what she has."

Signor Ricordo laughed quietly.

"I think I see," he said presently.

"What do you see?"

"Her motives."

"What are they, then?" asked Briarfield almost angrily.

"Notoriety—and, shall we say, position?"

"Are you not judging without sufficient reason?" asked Herbert Briarfield warmly. "You have never seen Miss Castlemaine."

"I am no longer a boy," said the other, with a sigh.

"What might that mean?"

"That I have seen women—in Paris, in Berlin, in Vienna, in Damascus, Constantinople, Cairo, Bagdad, Calcutta. Yes, I have seen them—women of all tongues, all nationalities. And everywhere they are the same."

"Well, and what is the sum total of your experience?"

"I would rather not tell you."

"Why? It is always well to know the truth."

"Mr. Briarfield, if there is one thing I am afraid of it is the truth. For many years I have made it my business to keep my eyes from beholding the truth; nevertheless, it always keeps thrusting itself upon me—always. That is why I am a sad man."

"Perhaps you have only seen one side of life."

Again a look suggesting pain shot across the stranger's face, but he still spoke quietly.

"Mr. Briarfield," he said, "I have even read the book which is to the English people a text-book of religion. I fancy I am somewhat of an exception, but I have. Well, the part of that book which interests me most is the Book of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps that is because the experience of its writer is my own experience. In all essential features, Solomon, or whoever was the author, wrote my experience. I have tried everything, Mr. Briarfield."

"And your conclusion?"

"Solomon's."

"If that were my creed," said Briarfield, "I should commit suicide."

"Of course I have thought of that—without fear. But I came to the conclusion that it wasn't worth while. 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come!'

Ay, there's the rub. Besides, I've something to live for."

"According to your creed I do not see what," said Briarfield. "It would be interesting to know."

"Ah, but I have something to live for, Mr. Briarfield."

"I suppose I might be intruding on your privacy if I sought to know what it was?"

"It's not love, and it's not money," said Ricordo.

"Ah, Herr Trübner, I apologise. I have monopolised your guest completely, and that is unforgivable. You have a great gift, my friend—all the Germans have—and it makes them a great people."

"What gift is that, signore?"

"The gift of listening."

After this the conversation drifted into general subjects, and a little later Herbert Briarfield took his leave.

"The man interests me, fascinates me, and yet I do not like him," he said to himself as he rode homeward. "I wonder who and what he is? But for that peculiar far-away sound in his voice, he speaks English like an Englishman. Sometimes I thought I detected a suggestion of Oxford in his tones. But then, again, when he spoke German to Trübner, he might have been reared in Berlin or Heidelberg. Again, he seems to know the East perfectly. I want to know more about him, and yet I feel afraid of him. In any case, I'll be at that concert on Friday. I wonder what she will think of him?"

"What do you think of Mr. Briarfield, signore?" asked Herr Trübner when he found himself alone with the stranger.

"I think he is in love with what you call the guardian angel of this place."

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"I never thought of that," said the German. "What made *you* think of it?"

"I kept my eyes open and I listened, that is all."

"It may be as you say," said the German reflectively. "Well, I should say from what I have heard, it would be a good match. He is a fine specimen of the English gentleman. I am told that he is well-off and very ambitious."

"And in what way does his ambition express itself?"

"Parliament."

Signor Ricordo laughed.

"You seem amused, signore. You are more merry than usual to-night. You like Mr. Briarfield. Do you not think he would be a good husband to our guardian angel?"

"I will tell you after Friday night."

"Why then?"

"Because I shall then have seen the lady of whom you have told me such wondrous things. I mean to be introduced to her, to talk with her. Ah!"

Herr Trübner looked towards his companion as he heard his exclamation. For once he saw that Signor Ricordo's eyes were wide open, and that a look which he never saw before rested on his face. But only for a moment. His eyes soon became half-closed again, and the air of cynical melancholy came back to him.

"We have some more visitors, I see," he said, nodding towards two men who had just entered the room.

The German turned, and saw two strangers take their seats.

"Got any cigars on you, Purvis?" he heard one say. "I left mine in another pocket, and I don't suppose we can get anything here fit to smoke."

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In reply, the other pulled his case from his pocket, and the two talked in low tones together.

"Yes, Herr Trübner," said Signore Ricordo, "I look forward towards an interesting evening on Friday."

CHAPTER XXI

A GAME OF GOLF—A GAME OF LIFE

"I WISH I hadn't come here, Purvis."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know how I feel."

Purvis shrugged his shoulders.

"Your mistake can easily be remedied, Sprague. You have only to take the train from Vale Linden station, and then you can go to Ilfracombe or Westward Ho! or, for that matter, return to London."

"Yes, I know; and I know, too, that it was through me you came down here. All the same, I feel jolly mean. Do you know, although that letter meant the smashing up of the engagement, and thus saving her life from ruin, she has never acknowledged it, and, for that matter, has never spoken to me since. Not that I expected gratitude, at least for a time, but after six years——"

"You know we both left England for a long sojourn abroad, directly we knew that the bubble had burst."

"Yes, I know; still, I did think that out of pure gratitude she might have——"

"She's not that sort, Sprague. Follow my example, and think no more about her. Hang it, we are not children; and she's not the only woman in the world."

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She gave us both our *congé*; let us take it graciously, and enjoy our golf."

"I wish I could forget her, old man; but I can't. I don't feel comfortable. For all these six years I've never forgotten her, and when Leicester made an end of himself, I said to myself, 'In two or three years' time she'll feel so grateful to me that——' Well, you know what I thought. But she's never recognised me in any way. Other people we know have been invited to Vale Linden, but I've never been one of the lucky ones. That was why I urged you to come with me to this place of hers. It meant having a chance of seeing her, and I hoped that she would feel kindly towards me."

"Well, she may. Who knows?"

"I wonder how she feels about Leicester now?"

"Most likely she's forgotten him."

"Hardly."

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, she's married no one else."

"I make nothing of that. Besides, if she really loved him, do you think she'd have thrown him over?"

"Yes," said Sprague, after a moment's hesitation.

"How do you make it out?"

"No woman with such pride as Olive has could have married him after the letter I wrote. I presented a strong case, man. You see, Leicester gave himself away so completely, that I had only to quote his exact words to prove—well, exactly what I wanted to prove. At any rate, she did throw him over."

"Do you think Leicester really cared for her?"

"Heaven only knows. It was impossible for any one

to tell exactly what he felt. At any rate, he went the whole hog afterwards, and then killed himself. Do you know, although the fellow's end was so terribly sad, I heaved a sigh of relief when I saw the report in the newspapers? If he'd lived—well, I don't like to think what would have happened to either of us. You know that terrible look in his eyes when he threatened us."

"Yes; but, after all, what could he do?"

"There's no knowing what a fellow like Leicester would have done. But there, he's dead, and that's an end of it."

The two men climbed the hill towards the moors in silence. Some distance behind, two boys followed, carrying their golf clubs.

"I suppose all this land around here belongs to John Castlemaine," remarked Purvis presently.

"I suppose so. I say, Purvis, did you notice what a mixed lot we are at The Homestead?"

"Rather; but I like it. They do things very well there, too. Of course, it was never intended for the likes of us; yet I am sure there are people there who have no need to economise. Some one told me that a neighbouring squire was dining there last night; and did you notice that Turkish chap?"

"Yes; remarkable-looking fellow, isn't he? He makes one think of vampires. Still, I hear he's a good sort. I should like to have a chat with him."

"Well, that should be easy enough. Somebody told me he had gone on the links. We may see him there."

They made their way to the clubhouse, and prepared to commence their game. A couple of men were on the first tee, waiting to start.

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"We shan't have to wait long," said Purvis. "I say, there is that Turkish fellow. I think he's looking for a match."

"Surely he won't be able to play."

"Anyhow, he has his clubs, and he seems to be wanting a game. Let's ask him to join us. It'll only be civil."

"I don't like threesomes."

"Neither do I on a crowded links, but it doesn't matter here. We have plenty of time; it's not ten o'clock yet."

"But I expect he's only a beginner. If he is, he'll spoil our game."

"Well, let's see."

Signor Ricordo stood near the tee as they came up. He bowed to them and stood aside.

"Are you not playing, sir?" asked Purvis.

"Yes," replied Ricordo. "I will go around by myself after you are gone. I arranged to meet a gentleman here just after nine; but I have received word to say he can't come."

"Have you played much?" asked Sprague.

Ricordo looked at him, his eyes half closed; nevertheless, there was evident interest in his gaze.

"We in the East do not play the game. But when I came to England—what would you?—what others did, I did. That is the English fashion, eh?" and he laughed quietly.

"Have you a handicap?" asked Sprague.

"A what?"

"A handicap. That means—well, it is a number of strokes allowed to a player."

"A handicap. Ah, yes, I am handicapped; but not

in that way, signore. I am afraid I do not play well enough even to have a handicap."

"Won't you join us?" asked Purvis. "We can easily make a threesome."

The stranger darted a look, not at Purvis, but at Sprague, and he saw that he did not take the proposition kindly. Both Purvis and Sprague were good players, and especially the latter did not wish the game spoiled.

"I cannot refuse such a kind invitation," said Signor Ricordo. "But I will not interfere with your play. Let the match be between you two, while I will struggle on as best I may. If—if I do not prove such a—a—what do you call it?—duffer as I fear, then I might sometimes enter into the competition; but that, I imagine, will not be. Still, I cannot refuse such courtesy."

He looked a striking figure as he stood by them. His clothes, although not very different from those worn by the others, were somewhat foreign in style; while his fez, surmounting his dark, Oriental-looking face, would single him out anywhere as an Eastern.

"Will you proceed, gentlemen?" he continued; "as for me, I will bring up the rear. If I find I am spoiling your game, I will drop out."

Purvis and Sprague tossed for the honour, and the former, having won it, drove first. His ball flew straight as an arrow towards the distant flag. Sprague followed next, and sent his ball within a dozen yards of the one which Purvis had driven."

"Ah," said Signore Ricordo, "I feel humbled before I begin. I see I shall not long deserve your society."

He struck his ball, and fozzled it badly. It went

away among the heather, where some two or three minutes were spent in finding it. Sprague and Purvis halved the hole, while Ricordo was several strokes down.

"We shall have to get rid of the fellow," said Sprague.

"You see he's only a beginner."

"Let us be civil," said Purvis. "We are staying at the same place, and he promises to be interesting."

The next hole Ricordo fared a little better, but only a little. Sprague began to think of some hint he could give him that would cause him to leave them.

"I will play one or two holes more with you, Mr.—Mr.—ah, I am afraid I did not catch your name."

"Sprague is my name."

"Sprague, Sprague—thank you; yes, I will remember. My name is Ricordo—that means remember, and I will remember, yes."

"And mine is Purvis."

"Thank you. Yes, I will remember. I will play one or two holes more with you, and then, if I continue to be such a—duffer—yes, that is the word—then I will go away, and challenge you for to-morrow."

"Golf is a difficult game," said Sprague; "one does not pick it up in a day."

"Ah, you do not think I will be a match for you to-morrow."

"Why, do you?" and Sprague laughed lightly.

"If not to-morrow, then the next day. I never rest until I am a match for my—what do you call it—enemy?"

"Not quite so bad as that—opponent," said Purvis.

"Opponent, yes, that is the word. I learnt English when I was a boy, but I have had such little practice at it lately, and so—but there, I will remember. When—

ever I play a game—and is not life a game?—I am often beaten at first. But then I remember that there is always a to-morrow, and so I go on."

"Until you are a match for your opponent?"

"Until I have beaten him," said Ricordo.

Sprague laughed. "A lot of to-morrows are required in golf, Mr. Ricordo," he said.

"Yes, they are required for most things; but they come. Still, this match is only just begun yet. Who knows? I may improve!"

This conversation had taken place while walking from the green to the tee, which in this case was some little distance.

For the next five holes Sprague and Purvis played with varying fortunes, but when the seventh hole was played the former was one up. As for Ricordo, while he greatly improved, he did not even halve a single hole with either of them. As he improved they offered to give him strokes, and so make the possibility of a match, but he refused.

"I always like to play level," he said sententiously. "You never beat a man if he gives you strokes. Let me see, I am now seven down. If I lose two more it will be impossible for me to win the match, eh?"

"That is the arithmetic of it, I imagine," said Purvis.

"Ah!" said Ricordo.

Ding! Ding! Ding! The three balls flew through the air, and each went straight to the green, only in this case Ricordo's ball went several yards further than the others.

"That was a lucky stroke of mine," he said, as he saw them exchange significant glances. "Ah! if I could only do it always!"

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For the first time Sprague felt a suggestion of competition in the game. Although he was seven holes up on the stranger, and they had only eleven more to play, the possibility of losing flashed into his mind. Besides, he felt some little resentment, because of the superior way in which the foreigner spoke. He seized an iron club, and placed his ball within two yards of the hole.

"Why, that is magnificent," remarked Ricordo. "That is where skill comes in."

Purvis came next, and while he sent his ball on the green, it was at an extreme corner.

"If I lose this hole, my chance of winning on you shrinks to a vanishing point," remarked Ricordo. "Well, I must not lose it."

He looked at the ball steadily, and then turned to his companions.

"Is it not whimsical?" he said. "This little thing seems to have become a part of our life, eh? And the game of golf is also a game of life, *non e vero*? Forgive me, signores, but I am an Eastern, and everything in life is a parable to such as I."

He struck the ball, and laid it, according to golfers' parlance, "dead."

"Fine shot," said Purvis; as for Sprague, he said nothing.

For the first time Purvis lost a hole to Ricordo, but Sprague halved it with him.

"Good hole," remarked Purvis. "One under bogey."

"Ah yes," said Ricordo, "but I cannot afford even to halve with Mr. Sprague if I am to win the match, eh? Seven up and ten to play. No, I must win, and not halve. I have lost so much in the beginning of

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the game. The game of life is always hard to win, when you lose in the beginning."

Sprague took the honour, and drove with unerring precision. As he saw it fall, a look of satisfaction came into his eyes.

"Longest ball you've driven to-day, Sprague," said Purvis. "It's possible to reach the green with a good 'brassy' from there."

"Nasty hazard just before the green, by the look of it," remarked Sprague, looking steadily.

"Ther' iz, zur," said one of the caddies, "great big pit overgrewed weth vuss and vearny stuff."

Ricordo addressed his ball. It was teed rather too high, and he patted it down. A moment later he made his shot. There was a slight curve on it, but he outdrove Sprague by two or three yards. Purvis fozzled his drive for the first time.

"Are you going to try it?" asked Purvis, as Sprague stood before his ball.

"It's risky," said the other. "Do your players here carry that green in two?" he asked the caddy who pulled out an iron for him.

"T 'ave bin dun, zur," replied the caddy. "The perfeshernal 'ave done et, an' a gen'leman from London; but moasly they doan't. Bezides, ther's a little wind."

"I'll try it," said Sprague, taking the brassy.

He struck the ball fairly, but it did not carry. It fell into the bushes.

Sprague suppressed an angry exclamation.

"Goin' to play for safety, zur?" asked the caddy of Ricordo.

Ricordo took the brassy from the boy, and looked steadily towards the green.

"Risky," remarked Purvis, almost involuntarily. He knew that according to strict rules he had no right to say anything.

"The essence of life is risk," remarked Ricordo. Somehow both felt that he was a different man from what he had been an hour before. He no longer seemed to be playing a game upon which nothing depended, but to be struggling for a great victory in life. His eyes were no longer half closed, and the old expression of cynical indifference was gone. A few seconds later his ball fell within six yards of the pin.

Neither of the players uttered a sound; but the boys could not suppress their admiration.

"You are six up at the turn, signore," remarked Ricordo to Sprague. "That is odds against one; but *noi verremo*."

Sprague walked silently to the next tee. It was the first hole he had lost to the foreigner, and although his position seemed well-nigh impregnable, he had a fear of losing. He felt as though he were not playing with a man, but with fate.

Ricordo took the honour. The green was over two hundred yards away, but he landed his ball safely on it. Sprague drove next; he failed to reach it by more than thirty yards. Purvis fared no better. Again Ricordo won the hole.

"Five up, and eight to play," he laughed pleasantly. "I cannot afford to make any mistakes, signore."

Ding, dong, went the balls. When they had played the seventeenth hole, Ricordo had actually placed himself one up on Purvis, and was all square with Sprague. The game was to be finished on the last green.

"Ah, I like that," said Ricordo lightly. "Life is

never interesting when everything is settled early in the game, eh, Mr. Sprague? And everything is worth so much more when we win by a single bold stroke, eh?"

Why it was, Sprague could not tell, but his heart beat faster than was its wont. An atmosphere of grim earnestness possessed him, and more, a fear filled his heart. After having the game in his hands he was in danger of losing it. Not that he had played badly. In nearly every case he had been level with bogey, but then in nearly every case for the last nine holes the stranger had beaten him by a stroke. Yes, he was angry. The man had commenced as a beginner, he had thrown away his chances, and yet he had recovered all the ground he had lost. More than once he caught himself watching Ricordo's dark features. The fez which surmounted his face made him look sinister. The black beard and moustache covered his mouth, but he fancied a mocking smile playing around his lips. The man impressed him as a mystery. Sometimes he found himself thinking of him as an Englishman, but again strange fancies flitted through his mind concerning him. He pictured him away in desert places, dreaming of dark things.

"Anyhow, I can't win," said Purvis. "The best I can do is to halve the match with you, Mr. Ricordo."

"But I have a chance of winning," said Sprague. "By the way, signore, we've had nothing on the game. What do you say to a stake on this hole?"

"No, Mr. Sprague, I never play for stakes, except the stake of life."

"What do you mean?"

"A game is always more than a game to me. It

has destiny in it. Thus we are playing for stakes, great stakes."

"What are they?"

"Ah, who can tell? Perhaps for heaven, perhaps for hell."

"Oh, I say!"

They were now standing on the eighteenth tee, and the green was near the club-house. Close to the flag they saw a woman and a man.

"Do you know who that is on the green?" Ricordo asked of the caddy who had made his tee and was moving away.

"Yes, zur; 'tes Miss Castlemaine, wot the links do belong to, and Muster Briarfield." The lad rushed away towards the green.

"Ah!" said Ricordo, "we may be playing for the lady—who knows?"

He looked at Sprague as he spoke, and noted the pallor of his face.

"Do you know Miss Castlemaine?" asked Purvis.

"I expected to see her when I came here," said the stranger; "but, as I said to Mr. Briarfield last night, although I have been here several days, I have not yet had the felicity of setting eyes on her. But fortune favours me now. Ah, we are playing for a great stake, Mr. Sprague. Who knows?"

"Perhaps the man who is standing by her side will win her," laughed Purvis. He hardly knew why he spoke.

"The man who is standing by may see most of the game," said Ricordo, "but he never wins—never. It is only the man who plays who wins. Ah, gentlemen, discussing the stakes on a tee is bad preparation for

a stroke ; therefore we will dismiss the subject. Besides, I never make wagers. Life itself is the wager."

He struck his ball, and although it flew far, it had what golfers call a "slice" on it. It cleared the hazard, but curled away to the right of the large green, at least twenty yards from the hole. He made no remark, but moved aside for Sprague to play.

"You've got your chance, Sprague," said Purvis in low tones. "A good straight shot, and you are close to the tee ; it can't be more than a hundred and eighty yards."

Sprague felt his hands tremble. He had not missed a drive for the round ; he determined he would not miss now. The stranger had made him feel that the game *was* a game of life. He knew not why, but it seemed to him that the future would depend on whether he won or lost.

His ball flew through the air. It was struck, and clean and true ; it fell within ten yards of the hole.

"Good !" said Purvis, "a good putt, and you are down in two." Somehow, he had lost interest in the game himself : all interest was centred in the other two. Even when his ball failed to reach the green he did not mind ; he did not care if he lost.

When they reached the green, they found that Sprague's ball had stymied Ricordo's—that is to say, it lay on the green on a straight line between Ricordo's ball and the hole.

"Will you either play out, or pick up your ball, signore ?" said Ricordo quietly. "I believe it is the law that there are no stymies in a three-ball match."

He said this because Sprague stood waiting for him to play.

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"If it is a stymie, certainly," he said, almost angrily.

"Look for yourself," said the stranger.

Sprague looked. "Very well, I'll play it out," he said.

He cast a hasty glance around, and saw that Olive Castlemaine and Herbert Briarfield had moved to the edge of the green and were watching the contest.

Sprague measured the distance carefully, then seizing the putter he played. The ball rolled to the lip of the hole, and stopped. His heart almost ceased to beat. Then perhaps a blade of grass bent or a breath of wind stirred—anyhow, the ball dropped into the hole.

Ricordo laughed pleasantly. "Ah, we halve it, I see," he said.

"It will take you all your time to do that," said Sprague triumphantly.

His words had scarcely escaped his lips when Signor Ricordo's ball came rolling across the green.

"Too lively," thought Purvis; but he was mistaken. It came straight to the hole and dropped in.

They heard some one clapping on the edge of the green; it was Herbert Briarfield, who had been watching.

"We will play it out another day," said Sprague.

Signor Ricordo walked away towards the spot where Herbert Briarfield and Olive Castlemaine stood. His eyes had half closed again, while the old air of cynical melancholy manifested itself in his face.

CHAPTER XXII

SIGNOR RICORDO AND OLIVE

"**T**HAT was a fine putt of yours, signore ; did you win the match ? " said Herbert Briarfield, as he came up.

" No, it was only halved. The game has to be played out yet."

" Signore, let me introduce you to Miss Castlemaine, to whose goodness we owe these links."

Olive looked at him eagerly. She half held out her hand, but the stranger did not offer to take it. He bowed low, placing his right hand on his fez ; but he did not lift it.

" I am greatly honoured," he said, in low tones, and Briarfield thought he detected an accent which he had not noticed before.

" You are enjoying your visit here, signore, I hope," said Olive, looking towards him curiously.

" It is becoming more interesting each day," was his reply.

" I am very glad," said Olive. " Perhaps you felt the place rather strange at first, and now, as you find congenial acquaintances, you feel, as we English say, ' more at home. ' "

" Yes, I am making acquaintances. This morning,

for example, I have enlarged the circle, and I found Mr. Sprague and Mr. Purvis very interesting."

"Whom did you say?" asked Olive quickly.

"Mr. Sprague and Mr. Purvis," said Ricordo, emphasising their names just as a foreigner might do. "Ah, you know them? I think they are coming this way."

"I must get back, Mr. Briarfield," said Olive quickly. "Father is expecting me to lunch."

"I will walk back with you," said Briarfield.

"And I, too, if I may," said Ricordo.

"You are not playing this afternoon?" said Briarfield.

"No, I think I am lazy, or perhaps I am getting old. We Easterns, you know, love to sit in the sun rather than exercise in it. Not that I feel tired. The air here gives one vigour. Ah, Miss Castlemaine, you were a benefactress to the tired part of the people of your country when you built your homestead."

"Only to a small degree, I am afraid," replied Olive. "It is only the few who can take advantage of it."

"Ah, but if all, situated as you are, would do likewise——" remarked Ricordo. "But there, I must not complain. I am one of the few. Besides, I have more than deserts. I have not been regarded as an alien. Ah, you must be very trustful to take a stranger in without asking questions."

"Miss Castlemaine is no respecter of nationalities," interposed Herbert Briarfield.

"Ah, no, to be poor, to be tired—that is enough. But Mr. Sprague and Mr. Purvis, whom I played the golf with, they did not look either poor or tired.

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But perhaps they know you—they spoke as though they did."

Olive did not reply, neither did she meet the eyes of Ricordo, which were lifted to her face. She wondered whether they had told this man anything of the past.

"And you like Vale Linden?" she asked presently, in order to break the silence.

"It is the Garden of Eden," replied Ricordo; "yes, the Garden of Eden before the serpent brought trouble."

She wanted to speak in reply; but nothing came to her to say. She felt that Herbert Briarfield was right. The man suggested mystery; she was not sure that he had favourably impressed her, and yet there was a kind of fascination in his presence.

"You know England?" she said presently; "you speak our language so well, you must have spent a good deal of time in the country."

"Can any man know a country?" asked Ricordo. "The geography, that is not difficult. An hour with a map, and even London can be known. But the fields, the hills, the roads, the towns, they do not make a country. The people of England, then? Ah, I am profoundly ignorant of the people."

"And yet we are not a difficult people to understand," remarked Olive.

"No, you think not? I do not know, I have never tried to know."

"No?"

"I am content to look on the surface."

"Is not that a strange attitude of mind for an Eastern?"

"I am afraid I do not follow you."

"Well, I have always been led to believe that people from the East are very philosophical and great seekers after truth."

"Ah, but years teach wisdom, signorina, and that wisdom says, 'Never seek the truth.'"

"Why?"

"Because truth is never worth the knowing."

He spoke quite naturally, and did not seem to be aware that he was making a cynical statement. Neither did he lift his eyes to her. He walked slowly, keeping his eyes on the ground.

Olive felt a strange fascination in his presence; moreover, she could not feel that she was speaking to a stranger. She had a feeling that she had seen him before, heard him speak before. And yet everything about him was strange. His voice was not familiar to her, and it had a peculiar fluid tone which sounded un-English, and yet she fancied that she had heard it somewhere. As she listened, she found herself recalling the past, and thinking of the days before the dark shadow fell upon her life. Without knowing why, she found herself thinking of Leicester. The stranger's cynicism reminded her of the night when she first met him. She remembered how Leicester had dominated the gathering at her father's house, and that she had found herself admiring him, even while she had disagreed with everything he had said. The same thing was happening now. Herbert Briarfield, of whom she had thought a great deal during the last few days, seemed to have sunk in the background. He was one who did not matter, while the man who was a stranger had blotted him out. Perhaps this was

because she found herself putting a double meaning on everything he said. Of course this might be because, owing to his Eastern associations, he would regard things differently from the way an Englishman would regard them; but she had spoken to men from the Orient before, and they had not impressed her in the same way. Still, she felt a kind of pleasure in matching her wits with his, even although she felt she might not come off best in the encounter.

"But would not your attitude of mind be fatal if it were universal, signore?" she asked.

"Pardon me, I think it is universal."

"You mean that we are not anxious to find the truth?"

"Exactly. Mind you, I do not say that you English people who boast of your honesty do not in theory hold that truth is the great thing to be sought after; but in action, in life, no. Let a man be true to truth and he is put down as a madman, a fool."

"Would you mind giving an example?"

"A dozen if you like. Here is one. It is a commonly accepted theory that well-being, happiness, depends not on what we possess, but on what we are. That 'to be' is more than 'to have.' How many are true to their creed? One in a million? Where one spends his energies in enriching his life, a million spend theirs on seeking to obtain what by common consent is evanescent. If half the energy were spent on beautifying character that is spent on 'getting on' in the ordinary acceptance of the term, what Christians call the millennium would come."

"Are you not assuming a great deal, signore?"

"But what, signorina?"

"That you understand the motives of the human heart?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"One judges by what one sees," he said. "And it is best to content oneself with that. The man who looks beneath the surface goes mad."

"And yet you are not mad?" and she laughed gaily.

"I am not sure," he said, and there was a quiet intensity in his tones—"no, I am not sure. Sometimes I think I am. But what then, signorina? We have our little lives to live, our little part to play on the world's stage."

Again she was reminded of Leicester, and as she thought of him a kind of shiver passed through her. This was Leicester over again; but another Leicester—a Leicester with a difference.

"But why play it, if it is so bad?"

"Ah, signorina, do you not think I have asked that question a thousand times? But then I have lived in the East. What can a man do against fate? The Arabians have got hold of a great truth: Kismet. Is not all philosophy centred in that?"

"No," she said, "I do not think so. If that is true, then every bad deed done would be the expression of God's will. Every murder, outrage, and abomination has His sanction, His benediction."

"Signorina has never lived in the East?"

"I do not see that that matters."

Signor Ricordo laughed quietly.

"It is refreshing to hear you," he said. "I can see into your mind now. You are thinking that the fatalistic doctrine destroys all virtue, all responsibility."

"Exactly."

"And yet are we responsible? Is not every action of life determined for us by circumstances, disposition, heredity, all forces over which we have no control?"

"And after you admit all that, every faculty of your being tells you you are responsible. After you have conceded every fatalist argument, you know that it is wrong. And more, you know that when you do wrong you are haunted by remorse, because you feel that you *could* have done right."

"Right! wrong!" said Ricordo, and he laughed in his soft, insinuating way.

"You do not believe in them?"

"Ah, signorina, let us cease to argue. Your faith is a tree which has borne such beautiful flowers and such wondrous fruits that you baffle logic. But then, signorina, you have never lived in hell."

Both Herbert Briarfield and Olive cast quick glances at him, but he did not alter his position; he walked quietly on, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"I say, Signor Ricordo," said Briarfield in an expostulating tone.

"That's why I am afraid of the truth," went on Ricordo, without seeming to notice Briarfield. "When a man has lived in hell for years, it upsets preconceived notions, it scatters logic to the winds, it makes conventional morality appear to be—what it is."

Olive Castlemaine felt that the man had thrown a kind of spell upon her. She did not realise that, to say the least, their conversation was not what was natural between people who had met for the first time. Had any one told her the previous day that on meeting a stranger of whom she knew nothing she would enter into

a discussion with him on such topics, she would have laughed at it as impossible, yet she felt nothing of the incongruity of the situation. Somehow Ricordo seemed like a voice out of the past, and for a time she forgot things present.

"You have lived—that is——"

"Yes, Miss Castlemaine, I have lived in hell. I have been deeper into its depths than Dante ever saw. The flames which he saw have burnt me, the 'thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice,' which Shakespeare spoke of have crushed out of me all those qualities natural to humanity. Nay, I forgot, not all, not all!"

Again Olive Castlemaine shivered. She thought of Leicester again, she knew not why. Lately the thought of him had less and less possessed her mind. A man who had died more than six years before had naturally become more and more only a memory. She could not have told why she thought of him, for this stranger, with his thick black beard and dark skin, bore little resemblance to the pale-faced, clean-shaven man she had known and loved years ago. Besides, the voice, the manner of speech were different. He was cast in a larger mould than Leicester, too, and was older by many years.

"I am afraid my speech is distasteful to you," went on Ricordo, "and I plead your forgiveness. I am not used to your ways, your modes of expression. And I trust I have not offended you. Believe me, such a thought, such a desire is far from me."

"By no means," she said quickly. "I—I am very interested. Doubtless the experiences of those who have lived in other lands are different from those who spend their lives in surroundings such as these."

Signor Ricordo cast his eyes quickly around, and beheld one of the fairest tracts of country on earth. Spring had come early, and the bursting life everywhere made one think of a universal resurrection. All nature seemed to be throwing off its grave-clothes. Woods and hedgerows, fields and gardens seemed to be clothing themselves in a magic mantle before their eyes, while the choirs of heaven were chanting for very joy.

"I think it must be easy to be good amidst surroundings like these, and on such a day as this," said Olive.

Ricordo stopped suddenly, and lifted his head. His eyes flamed with a new light, his face betrayed passion.

"What is it all but mockery?" he said—"a promise never to be realised, the fair skin which covers disease—rottenness? Signorina—forgive me. But there are spots on earth fairer than this—fairer, yes, a thousand times. Flowers, foliage, compared with which all that you see is but a suggestion. The sun! Great Allah! have you seen an Eastern sun, have you seen the prodigality with which nature scatters her beauty? But goodness! When did ever natural beauty help what you call moral goodness? In those places where nature has been most bountiful in her gifts, there you find the blackest and foulest lives. What is everything, if there is a canker at the heart; what matters if hell goes on burning in our lives? Forgive me, signorina; if there is one thing in which I have agreed with your Christian preachers, it is that natural beauty is powerless to cleanse the heart of what you call sin."

"But surely a man is affected by his circumstances," interposed Herbert Briarfield.

"Is not nature always laughing at us?" said Ricordo.

"We dream our little dreams, make our little plans, and live in a fool's paradise. Let people be surrounded by beautiful things, we say—let them have works of art, fine pictures, music; let them live in the sunshine, and behold the beauties of nature, then they will live beautiful lives. I have heard your moral reformers preach this—this nonsense. Well, what happens? Is the morality of your west of London any better than the east? Ah, but I tell you I have lived in the most beautiful places on earth, but they have been hell all the same. Can you cure a cancer by placing a bunch of flowers in the room of your patient?"

"Then what is your antidote—your gospel?" asked Olive.

"Is there the one or the other?" asked Ricordo.

The party went on quietly for a few minutes. Ricordo seemed to be thinking deeply; now and then he lifted his eyes for a passing glance at his companions.

Again Olive Castlemaine thought of Leicester. Memories of those days which he spent at The Beeches came rushing back to her. She thought of the happiness which was hers, when she hoped and prayed that she should be the means whereby the man she loved should be brought to faith—to God. In some subtle way which she could not understand, the stranger made him real, ay, and more, he made her feel that she had been harsh and unfair to the man whose wife she had promised to be. After all, was it not her pride he had wounded? Moreover, Ricordo had interested her in himself, in a way that she had been interested in no other man for a long time. It was not so much because of what he said. Rather, it lay in the fascination of the man himself. He made such as Herbert Briarfield

seem small and commonplace. She felt sure that he had lived in a realm of thought and being to which the young squire was a stranger.

The essence of interest is mystery. It is rather in the things not seen, than in the things seen, that fascination lies. We are for ever longing to explore new regions, to tread ground hitherto untrodden. The secret chamber of a house is of infinitely more interest than those chambers which are open to inspection; that is why we care little about those people in whose life there is no secret chamber of thought and experience.

"I wonder you don't write a book, Signor Ricordo," said Briarfield presently.

"And why, Mr. Briarfield?"

"You must have a wonderful story to tell."

"Yes, a wonderful story, perhaps; but would you have me lay open my soul to the gaze of the vulgar crowd?"

"Other men have."

"Why?"

"Perhaps to make money, perhaps to obtain renown or to do good. Dante gave the world his vision of hell, and of heaven; why not you?"

"Because I am not a poet, and because—well, every man has his own way of telling his story. Besides, if ever I were to tell the story of my life I should choose my audience."

They had by this time reached the gate which opened the way into the grounds of The Homestead, and as if by one consent the trio stopped.

"Are you staying here long, signore?" asked Olive.

"I do not know. I am given to understand that there is an unwritten rule that no visitor shall stay at

your beautiful home for the poor, and the tired, for more than a month, Miss Castlemaine," he said. "The rule is just and wise. Your desire is to give the greatest happiness to the greatest number, and therefore it is not right that I should stay more than a month. Still, because the place seems to grow more beautiful, and more interesting every day, I may take rooms in some farmhouse. On the other hand, I may leave at the end of next week."

He looked up at her as he spoke, and watched her attentively out of his half-closed eyes.

"I hope I may have the privilege of seeing you again before I go, whether my stay be long or short," he added presently.

She knew not why, and she wondered afterwards whether she had done right. She had seen him that day for the first time. All she knew of him was that he was an Eastern stranger, who from his own confession had a strange past, and held opinions which to say the least of them seemed dangerous, yet yielding on the impulse of the moment she expressed the hope that she should see him at Vale Linden.

"Ah, signorina," said Ricordo, "I am not worthy of so great an honour; nevertheless, I accept it before you have time to repent, and withdraw your invitation." At this moment he stopped at the gates of The Homestead.

Again she half held out her hand, but again he did not notice it. He lifted his fez slightly, and then, with a somewhat exaggerated bow, he passed into the garden. But he did not stay to notice those who were sitting in the warm spring sunshine: he seemed to be eager to get to his rooms. Arrived there, he sat for

a long time staring into vacancy. His eyes were no longer half closed, but were wide open, and there was an expression which, had Olive Castlemaine seen, would have made her shudder. For in them was the fierce glare of a madman. The old look of cynical melancholy, or placid indifference, was gone. He was no longer a fatalist philosopher, the thoughtful Eastern gentleman who laughed quietly at conventional notions. His hands clenched and unclenched themselves, his features worked with passion. Presently he rose and paced the room; it seemed as though the volcanic passions of his being could no longer be repressed; his whole body trembled, his eyes became almost lurid.

"She has forgotten, forgotten," he said presently. "She is happy as Lady Bountiful, and she has half made up her mind to marry that heavy-headed, heavy-limbed squire. But——"

He stopped speaking and threw himself into a chair again.

"I am invited up to the great house," he continued presently. "There I shall meet—who knows?"

He turned to a mirror, and looked at himself long and steadily. At first there was a curious look in his eyes, as though he wanted to be sure about something; but presently the look of curiosity changed to one of satisfaction.

When he went down to the dining-room, and mingled with the other guests, his face was perfectly placid again, while his eyes became half closed, as though he had not enough interest in life to open them wide.

CHAPTER XXIII

SPRAGUE'S EXPLANATION

MEANWHILE Purvis and Sprague sat in the golf club-house eating the chops that the caretaker's wife had cooked for them. They had been very silent during the early part of the meal, and seemed to be intent either on the fare that was set before them, or on the moorland, which they could see from the windows of the dining-room.

"I say, Purvis, what do you think of him?"

"Of whom?"

"You know. Don't you think he was laughing at us during the early part of the game?"

"Why?"

"Why, just think. For the first few holes he played like a twenty-seven handicap man, or even worse than that. Then suddenly—why, you saw for yourself. I played a good game, and so did you; but where were we? He might have been a first-class professional. What do you think he meant by it?"

"Probably nothing. I should say he is one of those remarkable fellows about whom one hears sometimes, but seldom sees, who can do almost anything. Somehow, I don't know why, but I felt the moment I spoke to him that he was a man with tremendous reserve power."

"Do you know who he reminds me of?"

"Yes."

"Yes, that's it. Of course he's utterly unlike what Leicester was, and yet he makes one think of him. You remember what a fine golfer he was and how deadly he was on the greens. If Leicester had lived, and had come here, they would have found a lot in common with each other."

"If Leicester had lived, my dear fellow, I don't suppose we should ever have come here."

"No, perhaps not. Still, this man reminds me of him. There is always the feeling that he's keeping something back. Somehow, I don't know why, but the fellow got on my nerves this morning. I was always seeing a double meaning in everything he said. Why, do you know at one time I positively feared him. I seemed to be playing for some fearful stake. I was reminded of that picture where a man plays chess with the devil for his soul. Then every now and then I fancied it was Leicester who was speaking. Yes, I know it was not Leicester's voice, neither is he like what Leicester was. His eyes are different, and of course his face is different. Leicester's face was pale as death; it was thin, too, and suggested the Greeks; this man, with his great black beard and dark skin, is different from what Leicester was; and yet sometimes he was like Leicester. Don't you remember that Oxford insolence of Leicester's which used to madden some people, and how while saying the most innocent-sounding things he was just laughing at them all the time? That's what I felt about this fellow. He speaks English with a foreign accent, and yet I felt sometimes as though he knew England well."

"Probably he does."

"He says he's only been in the country three months."

"You saw him go away with——"

"Yes, I saw him. That young fellow who was with her introduced him. By the way, do you think she was near enough to know who we were?"

"I should think not. They moved away directly the stranger came up."

"We shall see her at the concert to-morrow night, I suppose. My word, Purvis, I feel nervous."

"Give it up, Sprague—give it up, man. You asked her years ago, and she refused you. What has happened since is not likely to endear you to her."

"Rather I think it is. Do you know I have a feeling that she is thankful to me now?"

"By the way, I should like you to challenge this Signor Ricordo to golf to-morrow. I will get a match with some one in the morning, and then during the afternoon we can play a foursome."

"I suppose one of us must ask him to play again; but do you know, I don't like the fellow."

"On the other hand, I do," said Purvis. "I shall make up to him to-night. He is one of those men who make you want to know them better. I'll warrant he could tell us a curious history if he liked."

The next day Signor Ricordo and Sprague played their return match, but the latter was not at his best. He complained that he had an attack of indigestion, and that his nerves had gone wrong. As a consequence Ricordo won easily.

"You play a remarkable game, signore; that is for one who has had so little practice," he said.

"Ah, I am but a beginner, Mr. Sprague," he said quietly ; "some time perhaps I may play a good game."

"You never suffer from nerves, I suppose ?"

"Yes, horribly."

"Then you have wonderful self-command."

"A man can will anything. There is no difficulty that will-power cannot overcome. Golf, like life, is a game ; to will to win, is to win."

"I willed to win ; but lost."

"No, you made up your mind to try. I always go further. I willed to win, if not one day, then the next."

"And you always do ?"

"Yes, I always do."

Sprague laughed uneasily.

"Do you mean to say that you have gained everything that you have set your mind upon ?" he asked curiously.

"Not yet, but I shall. Some games are long, they take time. But there is always a to-morrow to the man who wills."

"Is that a part of your Eastern philosophy ?"

"If you will. Eastern or Western, it does not matter—human nature is always the same."

"But human nature has its limitations. Life is not very long, after all."

"I do not know your English literature well, Signore Sprague ; but I have read your Browning. He had the greatest brain of the nineteenth century, I think. His mixture of Eastern blood may account for it. He said 'Leave "now" to dogs and apes, man has for ever.' That is always true. There is no death, or if there is, man always rises again."

"Then you believe that what a man fails to do in this life, he will do in another ?"

"Always. There is one thing a man never loses—memory. It may leave him for a time; but it always returns. Do you know Italian, *sig ore?*"

"No."

"My name is *Ricordo*. It means remembrance. It is not only a name, it is an expression of an eternal truth. Nothing is forgotten, nothing. Even those whom we call dead remember."

"Ah, you are beyond me," laughed Sprague uneasily. "I am no philosopher. Still, I shall remember what you say about 'willing.' When next we play I shall will to win."

"So shall I."

"What will happen then?"

"Victory for the strongest will."

The two men separated, Sprague with an uneasy feeling in his heart, and *Ricordo* with a strange smile upon his face.

That evening the concert was held in the village hall, during which Signor *Ricordo* manifested but little enthusiasm. Indeed, during most of the time he sat with his eyes closed, and once or twice he seemed to suppress a yawn with difficulty, as though he were bored. When Olive sang, however, all was different. He watched her face closely, and listened with almost painful attention. He seemed pleased when the audience applauded, and more than once he uttered a low "bravo"; but there was no marked enthusiasm in his appreciation. Indeed, it was difficult to tell what he thought of her performance as a whole.

When the concert was over, he was introduced to John Castlemaine. This was the first time he had met him. Mr. Castlemaine had been away to London for

several days, and had only returned the day before. Olive had spoken to him concerning Ricordo on her return from the golf links, and he was prepared to be interested in the man from the East.

"This must be a great change from your Eastern life, Signor Ricordo," he said.

"Yes, and no," replied Ricordo; "but it has been very interesting."

"Are you staying long?"

"In Vale Linden? Only a few days, I expect. In England? Yes, for some months, I think. Probably until your summer is over. It would be hard to spend another winter in England. I came just after your Christmas, and I spent three months in London. I had affairs there."

"Ah, you are a man of business, then?"

"We all have business, haven't we? I am a partner in the Tripoli, Fezzan, Mourzouck Company."

John Castlemaine's eyes flashed with satisfaction. The stranger was no wandering, nameless adventurer. The Tripoli, Fezzan, Mourzouck Company was the great trading power of the East, doing not only great business in England, but throughout the world.

"I am not here as a representative of my firm, Signor Castlemaine," said Ricordo, "but I know the English customs." He took a small case from his pocket, and presented a card to him, and also papers which revealed the imprimatur of the company. Mr. Castlemaine also saw that the stamp of the firm was upon his letter-case.

"I feel honoured in welcoming you to our neighbourhood," said John Castlemaine. "Years ago I did business with you. I little thought then that I should

meet with a partner in your famous firm under such circumstances."

"The world is small," said Ricordo quietly. "For the last year I have taken but little active part in affairs; and I have come to England because of personal matters."

"And I am delighted to see you, signore—delighted. More than that, I cannot consent for you to leave Vale Linden soon. I hope you will come up to my house, Signor Ricordo. I am now a man of leisure, and shall look forward to seeing much of you. Olive, do you know that the great company of which Signor Ricordo is a partner is well known to me? It is very fortunate you met him yesterday. Yes, signore, I can take no refusal. I must insist on your coming up to Vale Linden to-night, for a smoke and a chat."

For a moment there was a look almost like anxiety in the stranger's eyes, but he spoke in his quiet, easy way.

"I feel greatly honoured," he said; "but we in the East have many—what you call conventions. Before I enter into the delights of your house, I must prove that I am what my card indicates."

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense," said John Castlemaine heartily. "No one could carry such papers as you carry without——"

"Excuse me, Mr. Castlemaine, if I persist," said the stranger. "If not to satisfy you, to satisfy myself." He drew a small piece of peculiar parchment from his case, and handed it to John Castlemaine. "My people always desire it, when we come into contact with the heads of great houses," he added.

Mr. Castlemaine took the parchment almost reverently, and read that Abdul Ricordo was a responsible partner

of the firm of Tripoli, Fezzan and Mourzouck, and the document was signed by the firm.

"Of course I do not need this, signore," said John Castlemaine; "nevertheless, I thank you for letting me see this. It shows me the methods of your firm, and from that standpoint alone this document is exceedingly interesting."

He turned again to his daughter.

"Will you not help me to persuade Signor Ricordo to walk up to the house with us, Olive?" he said. "It is quite early yet, and, wonder of wonders, we have no guests at present."

Ricordo turned to Olive, who expressed her delight at the thought of his accompanying them.

"Then I can do no other than gratefully accept," said Ricordo; "but I am afraid I am monopolising your company, Signor Castlemaine."

He turned aside as he spoke, and made room for Purvis and Sprague, who had evidently been waiting for a chance to speak to them.

"I could not help making the most of the opportunity which you have afforded," said Sprague. "I am afraid The Homestead was not meant for such as Purvis and myself; but you will forgive me, won't you?"

There was marked restraint in John Castlemaine's welcome of the two men, still he greeted them civilly. Perhaps he had partly forgotten the part they took in the painful drama of years before. As for Olive, she was evidently undecided what to do. She ended, however, by speaking civilly to them both, but did not seem at all pleased that they should come and speak to her.

"I see you know my late opponent on the golf links," said Sprague, turning to Ricordo.

"We have met to-night for the first time," said Mr. Castlemaine, turning towards the stranger, and as he turned he saw a look in his eyes that made him feel uncomfortable. There was such a sinister expression on Ricordo's face, that he wondered if he had done right in asking him, in spite of his unquestionable credentials, to his house. For this reason he was almost glad that Sprague and Purvis were there. He had known them well years before, and although he had no pleasure in recalling the past, he felt that he might seem churlish, and uncivil, if he did not extend his invitation to them. Acting on the impulse of the moment, therefore, a thing which was very rare with him, he asked them both to walk up to the house.

"Signor Ricordo is coming up," he said; "you might as well join him if you care, and then you can all walk back together."

"Delighted, I am sure," said Sprague; but Purvis pleaded a headache, and declared that he would be such a dull companion that he would not inflict his company upon them. The quartette started their walk, and passed through the village almost without a word. Whether Ricordo was pleased or annoyed because of Sprague's presence it was impossible to say. He showed no sign either way. While they were in the village they walked abreast, but after they had passed through the lodge gates, Sprague and Olive walked side by side, while Ricordo and Mr. Castlemaine came on behind. Sprague found himself strangely nervous when he realised that he was alone with Olive. It was he who had sent the letter which had been

followed by such fatal results, and never since that time had he and Olive Castlemaine spoken to each other.

"I am glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you alone, Miss Castlemaine," he said.

Olive did not reply, but waited for him to continue. For years her heart had been very bitter towards him, in spite of the fact that she believed he had revealed to her the real character of the man she had promised to marry. But then Sprague's part in the affair was not altogether honourable. He had been a party to the discussion which led to the wager, and although on his own account he had done his best to persuade Leicester from pursuing the course he had adopted, she could not think of him without a feeling of anger.

"I do not know whether you were angry, or thankful to me, for writing that letter," he said. "I never received any reply to it."

"There was nothing to which I could reply," she said.

"Perhaps not," replied Sprague, "and yet I have never known how you regarded my action in the matter. That is why I am so thankful for this opportunity of speaking to you."

"Pardon me," said Olive, "but would you mind letting the past be dead, and forgotten? As you may imagine, it cannot be pleasant to me."

"I only wanted to know that you had forgiven me," said Sprague. "Moreover, I wanted to tell you the truth. No one can be more ashamed than I at the course events took. But I never dreamt that—that ever your name would be mentioned. It was, as it were, forced upon me. As for that letter—well, I felt

I could do no other than write it. It would have been cowardly, and base of me, not to tell you the truth."

"And what you told me was the truth—the whole truth?" asked Olive. She spoke quickly and nervously, as though a great deal depended upon the answer.

"As far as I know I told you exactly what happened—exactly. It seemed to me you had a right to know, and that it would have been criminal on my part if I had kept silent. That is what I wished to say."

"And now, having said it, will you never refer to it again."

"Just another word, please. You are not angry with me, that is, you do not think badly of me because I told you?"

"I ought to be grateful to you for that part of your action in the matter, and—I am."

She seemed to speak with an effort, but Sprague was evidently satisfied.

"You have chosen a beautiful place to live in, Miss Castlemaine," he said; "and hundreds of people are grateful because of what you have done. I hardly feel justified in benefiting by—shall I call it your hospitality?—but I really wanted to see you again."

"Yes, it is a beautiful neighbourhood," said Olive; "and I hope you will enjoy your stay here."

"Thank you, I am sure I shall," replied Sprague. He had got through the painful part of his conversation—clumsily, it is true; but still it was over, and now he felt a real pleasure in thinking that for the next few days he would be living in close proximity to the woman whom he had once asked to be his wife.

"What do you think of Signor Ricordo?" he went on. "Striking-looking fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes," replied Olive.

"Do you know I've played golf with him twice, and I can't make him out. Perhaps it is because of his Eastern mode of speech, but he always makes me think of mysteries. When I saw him first he made me think of vampires, and although that feeling has gone, I am not sure that I like him."

"I should think he is a very remarkable man," said Olive evasively.

"He is mysterious, at all events," said Sprague. "How beautiful the park looks in the moonlight!"

He stopped as he spoke, and looked across the park towards the moorlands that were dimly visible in the light of the moon. As they stopped, Mr. Castlemaine and Signor Ricordo came up.

"I am enjoying your wonderful scenery, Mr. Castlemaine," said Sprague.

"Yes, it is very fine. You can almost see the golf links from here."

"Ah, don't talk of them," said Sprague, with a laugh. "I thought I could play a decent game, but Signor Ricordo has beaten me so badly to-day that I feel humiliated. I thought I should find him an easy opponent, too. He told me he was only a beginner."

"You may have better luck next time," said Mr. Castlemaine.

"If Signor Ricordo thinks I am worthy to be his opponent for another game," responded Sprague.

"Oh yes," replied Ricordo, "our play is not played out yet. We will play it to the bitter end."

He laughed quietly as he spoke, but Olive thought she detected something sinister in it.

"I hope there will be nothing bitter in it," said

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Sprague. "For my own part I think golf is the most friendly and sociable game in the world."

"Ah, but as I told you, I am an Eastern," said Ricordo; "and to us all games are serious. But we will play it, signore we will play the game out."

"That's right," said Mr. Castlemaine; "meanwhile, here we are at the house. Will you enter, gentlemen?"

Signor Ricordo and Sprague entered the house side by side.

CHAPTER XXIV

RICORDO'S REMINISCENCES

ALTHOUGH the spring was well advanced, a bright fire burned in the room where Mr. John Castlemaine ushered his guests. Several easy chairs were placed around the fire. Evidently Mr. Castlemaine used this room as a kind of smoking lounge, although there were also evidences that it was not used for men exclusively.

They had scarcely seated themselves, when a servant entered, bearing cigars and a decanter containing spirits.

"You will take a little whisky, Signor Ricordo?" said Mr. Castlemaine, turning to his guest.

"No, thank you, I never take whisky."

"You are an abstainer?"

"Yes."

There was a strange tone in his voice, but he spoke very quietly, as was his custom.

"Ah, perhaps you are a Mohammedan," said Sprague, who accepted Mr. Castlemaine's invitation.

"No, Mr. Sprague, I am not a Mohammedan, as you understand it. I do not take whisky because—well, because a man who was once my friend was ruined through it."

At that moment Olive entered the room, and took a chair close by her father's. She had heard Ricordo's answer to Sprague.

"That's scarcely a reason for refusing a harmless beverage," said Sprague.

"Harmless?" said Ricordo; "well, that is surely a matter of opinion."

"One would have to give up everything in life, on that principle of argument," urged Sprague.

"I do not wish to argue," said Ricordo, "but I will put a case to Mr. Castlemaine. Suppose he had a friend for whom he cared greatly, or for whom some one dear to him cared greatly, and that friend were ruined through alcohol; suppose he ceased to be a man and became a fiend through it, would he offer whisky to his guests?"

Signor Ricordo put the question to his host; but he kept his eyes on Olive, who started as if she had been stung, and then became as pale as death.

John Castlemaine laughed uneasily.

"You are almost as strong in your hatred of alcohol as my daughter, signorè," he said. "Personally, I am a very abstemious man. I have closed nearly every public-house on the estate; but I remember my duties as a host."

Ricordo did not reply, but Olive felt how illogical her father's position was.

"But you smoke," went on Mr. Castlemaine, passing him a box of cigars. "I don't think these are bad."

"I am sure they are excellent," said Ricordo, "but I am obliged to smoke only one brand. I had to pay a heavy duty to bring a sufficient stock with me,

but I had either to do it, or give up smoking. You will not mind if I smoke this, instead of yours, which I have no doubt are very much better."

"Oh, certainly not, if you wish," said Mr. Castlemaine rather coldly.

Ricordo bowed, and lit a cigar which he had taken from his own case. His refusal either to take whisky or to smoke his host's cigars had caused a feeling of restraint in the party.

"My cigars are a special brand," went on Ricordo. "They are no better than others, I suppose, but I can smoke no others. I imagine the constitution of the Easterns must be peculiar."

He looked at Olive as he spoke, and noted that she was watching him. As their eyes met, she dropped hers. She had not spoken since she entered the room.

"The manners and customs of those who live in the East are, of course, very different from ours. And of course their ideas are different too."

"How so, signore?"

He lay back in his chair as he spoke, and closed his eyes, as one who is enjoying a lazy contentment.

"Well, I suppose their ideas of hospitality are different. I have been told that they will never partake of the fare of an enemy."

"Is not that right?"

"Then again, of course their customs are different, I suppose. They are allowed a plurality of wives."

"And as a consequence many fail to marry at all."

"You seem to speak feelingly," laughed Sprague.

"Oh no, I assure you. I simply state a fact. For

example, here am I, who can no longer be called a boy, and who am an Eastern, am also a celibate."

"You have never been married?"

"Never."

"Well," said Sprague, "there is nothing so wonderful in that. I am no longer a boy, and I have never married."

"You make one curious," said Ricordo.

"How?"

"One would like to know why you, Mr. Sprague, who are evidently a domestic kind of man, have never married."

"I will tell you on one condition."

"And that?"

"That you will tell me why you never married."

"I accept."

"Then I have never married because the only woman I ever wanted refused to have me."

"And I have refrained from getting married because I am afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Exactly."

"Of what?"

"Of many things, signore, many things."

"You make me curious to know what those things are."

"To tell you would be to tell the story of another man's life," replied Signor Ricordo gravely. "As you remarked, I am an Eastern, but we Easterns are not different from the Westerns in that direction. All of us have a secret chamber in our lives."

"Still," urged Sprague, "I cannot conceive of you, signore, being afraid of anything."

"I am not often in a communicative mood," said Ricordo; "I think I am to-night. Perhaps it is because I have received so much kindness. I am profoundly impressed," and here he bowed to Mr. Castlemaine and Olive, "by the fact that I, an alien, am received into the home of a representative of what is regarded as a proud and exclusive race. Never can I forget such hospitality. But one thing keeps me from communicating my thoughts: I would not willingly give pain to the signorina."

"To me, Signor Ricordo?" said Olive. "Pray, how am I concerned?"

"Directly not at all; but, as every woman is a champion of her sex, a great deal. And I would not desire even to suggest a thought that would seem to reflect on the sex to which the signorina adds so much lustre."

"But surely I am not responsible for my sex, signore," said Olive, with a laugh. Again he had cast a kind of spell on her, and she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"Ah well, then, let me be communicative," said Ricordo. "I said I had never married because I was afraid. I told the truth. Forgive me if I seem sentimental; but once, years ago—ah, how many I do not like to think—I might have yielded to love. Others had done so, and why not I? But I had a friend, a man whom I loved beyond all others. For years we had been more than brothers, his thoughts were mine, and mine were his. Then he fell in love with a woman, beautiful, and true, and good—at least, so we believed. She became his lodestar, his hope, his joy, and I naturally became as nothing to him. I did not grow angry at

that. My only desire was that he should be happy, and as he found happiness in her love, what was I? He was not an angel, not altogether a good man, and often in my love for him I tried to reclaim him; I failed; but where I failed this woman succeeded. Ah, great Allah! how he loved her! He became her slave, and yet I rejoiced because she was lifting him to heaven. He was on his way to becoming a great man in the East, and then—this woman, because of some imperfection in his past—what do you call it?—jilted him. My friend was an intense kind of man. He had given his hope, his faith, his love, to this woman, and then, without giving him an opportunity of explaining himself, she threw him aside with scorn. Did he deserve her scorn? This I know, my poor friend, the byword of those who knew him, overwhelmed with a hopeless passion, thrown on the sea of life without anchor or rudder, drifted. Where? Ah, that is a story I cannot tell. But this woman, who might have been his salvation, and who professed to return his love, sent him into regions more terrible than ever your Milton, or our Italian Dante, saw with the eyes of vision."

"And where is he now?" asked Sprague.

"Where? That I cannot tell you. For a time I followed him, watched him, as he sank deeper and deeper into the pit. I stood upon the brink and looked in; but he had neither the strength nor the will to grasp my hand, and if he had, I should not have been strong enough to have pulled him out."

"And the woman?" asked Sprague.

"The woman is, I believe, meditating marriage with some one else. A common story, I know. Perhaps

you could tell similar ones ; perhaps, too, the commonness of such stories makes me afraid."

He was sitting back in his chair as he spoke. His eyes were half closed and he lazily smoked his cigar. Nevertheless, Olive thought he was watching her furtively. But perhaps that was because his story aroused memories which made the past live again.

From this time the conversation drifted on to other subjects, and Signor Ricordo made himself vastly agreeable. Without in any degree monopolising the conversation, he became the centre of interest. He showed that, although an Eastern, he was acquainted with English literature, and although he spoke English with a peculiar intonation, he expressed his thoughts with great clearness. Olive said but little. The story he had told contained such a meaning for her, that she had no desire to speak ; nevertheless, she listened eagerly to his every word. Besides, his presence continued to have a kind of fascination for her. Why, she could not tell, yet when he rose to take his leave, she felt that everything would seem tame and commonplace after he had gone.

Mr. Castlemaine again pressed refreshments upon him ; but again he refused to take them. It is true that he refused with a great show of courtesy, but he seemed determined to partake of nothing which the house could offer.

"I am afraid you are thinking of my sad story," he said, turning to Olive as he was on the point of saying good-night. "Of course you English have different thoughts and customs from the Easterns ; still, I would like to ask you a question, if I might."

"Certainly," replied Olive, trying to appear cheerful.

"Do you think my friend would be justified in seeking revenge on the woman who sent him to despair, and worse than death?"

"I do not know all the circumstances, signore," she replied, "neither do I think that revenge is ever justifiable."

"Ah, no. You believe in the teaching of the Founder of your religion, 'love your enemies,' eh? But if you knew, signorina, if you knew!"

"The woman may be suffering more than you think."

"Suffering! Ah, I have seen her. Her life is one long song. She is careless, she has a life full of pleasure. Her admirers throng around her. She professes to be a Christian, too, and goes to church; but she thinks not of the poor soul wandering in blackest night. But I think he would be justified in seeking revenge."

"What revenge?" asked Olive. "What kind of revenge could he take?"

"I have thought of that, signorina, and I cannot think what it should be. She is to all appearances beyond his reach. She is rich, powerful, petted, courted; while he—ah, if I only knew where he was! Yet sometimes I think he must be planning his revenge. It would be better for her if he had died. For, if he does take revenge, it will be sure, and the torture will be exquisite."

"Perhaps he loves her still."

"Loves her! No, he hates her with all the madness with which he loved her. His passion of love has turned to bitterness, to wormwood. That is why I think his degradation and despair will drive him to

revenge. I am glad I am in a Christian country, where the vendetta is not known. Good-night, signorina."

"Did you notice, Olive, that he refused to partake of any form of refreshment?" said John Castlemaine to his daughter, after Sprague and Ricordo had gone.

"Yes," said Olive; "but then I am told that people from the East seldom drink spirits. I am sorry you asked him."

"He's a remarkable kind of man."

"Yes."

"Do I know whom you are thinking of, Olive?"

She nodded her head.

"He reminds me of him, too. Sometimes I fancied I heard him speaking. Still, that is of course pure fancy. Olive, when are you going to forget him?"

"I don't know."

"I was hoping that he had passed out of your life."

"I thought he had, but that man's story seemed to bring everything back."

"I confess he made me feel uncomfortable. Still, he is a most entertaining man, and his position and rank are unquestionable. He belongs to a firm which rules the trade of the East, and he must be highly connected, or he would never have been admitted into partnership. We must invite him here to some social function before he leaves. You would like it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," said Olive, "he's a most entertaining man. By all means let us invite him."

Meanwhile Ricordo and Sprague walked back to The Homestead, and as they walked they talked

business. Sprague could not help feeling astonishment at Ricordo's knowledge of English commercial life, and entered into a discussion concerning its position and prospects with great eagerness. By the time they reached the house, Sprague had revealed to the stranger many particulars concerning his own relations with the commercial world.

The next day, without having given any warning to any one concerning his intention, Ricordo went to London, where he stayed several days. He had retained his rooms at The Homestead, however, and told the lady who had the management of it that he might return at any time. While in London, his time seemed very fully occupied, and he had long interviews with men occupying high positions in the commercial world. He also invested largely, and took part in far-reaching transactions. At the end of a few days he returned to Vale Linden again.

"It is simply a matter of time now," he said to himself, as the train swept on towards the south. "I have my hands on all the strings, and I have enveloped him as the proverbial spider envelops the proverbial fly. Whatever he does, he cannot escape. As for her——"

He sat back in the railway carriage, and apparently fell into deep thought. To the casual observer he seemed a prosperous Eastern gentleman, one whose whole demeanour and appearance suggested a man of rank and power. The close observer, however, would have detected a cruel smile beneath his black moustache, while in his eyes he would have seen a look that suggested dark deeds. The face would have impressed him with the suggestion of an indomitable will, and of

a kind of imperious pride, but there was no suggestion of mercy or pity to be seen there.

When he arrived at Vale Linden, however, he had assumed his old manner of cynical melancholy, and he met the people he knew with the easy grace peculiar to him.

"We have missed you sorely," said Sprague, as he sat beside him at dinner; "in fact, all of us have wondered where you have been."

"Ah, Signor Sprague, where could one go in England, except to London? I have had affairs there. Usually I do not trouble about these things, but at times fits of industry come upon me."

"Ah, yes. I have heard that you are a partner in the great Tripoli Company. I had no idea I had made the acquaintance of one who practically rules the trade of the East."

"One is not in the habit of publishing one's position from the housetops," replied Ricordo.

"Oh no, of course not. Are you staying much longer?"

"Possibly; I do not know. I have come back for some more golf."

"Shall we have our match to-morrow?" asked Sprague. "I have been playing a good game while you have been away."

"I will tell you in the morning," replied the other. "Have you been up to the great house since I left?"

"No. I have seen Miss Castlemaine, though. She was on the golf links to-day."

Ricordo's eyes lit up with satisfaction, although he said nothing; but soon after dinner he left the house, and walked towards Olive Castlemaine's home. He

had barely left the village when he saw Olive coming out of a cottage. He half lifted his fez, and bowed.

"May I make a confession, Miss Castlemaine?" he asked.

"Why not, if it is not of a serious nature?" responded Olive. There was a look of pleased expectancy in her eyes as she saw him.

"Then I was on the point of going to your house."

"You wished to see father. I am sure he will be pleased. I am just going home."

"And may I walk back with you?"

"Certainly, if you care to."

"I was not going to see your father, Miss Castlemaine."

"No?"

"No, I was going to see you. Do you know I have been playing golf since I came to England?"

"Yes, I heard that you performed wonders on our links. As you will remember, I saw you there."

"And I have heard that you are great at the game. I have had the audacity to wonder if you would play with me to-morrow morning. I can assure you it would be an act of charity towards a lonely man if you would."

"I am afraid, from what I have heard of your prowess, I should scarcely be able to give you a game, but if you will condescend so far I will do my best."

"Thank you, you are very kind. Indeed, every one is kind to me. I have been away to London for only a few days, and yet Mr. Sprague met me as though I were an old friend. It is pleasant to have a welcome in a strange land."

He seemed in a gay mood during the remainder of

their walk, but when they came to the house he would not go in. He had letters to write, he said, and he wanted to get them off his mind.

"You do not believe me," he laughed; "you believe that we Easterns are all indolent, shiftless. But no, even I can be most industrious at times. Why, while I have been in London, I have worked harder than an Arab."

"Do Arabs work hard?"

"Ah, you do not believe me. But I can assure you that my activity and industry have been wonderful. You would never guess why."

"Oh, yes," said Olive; "men of business work to make money."

"Ah, no, I think I have lost money; but that does not matter, because I have done what I set out to do. *A rividerici, signorina.*"

"*A domani.*"

"You know Italian then?"

"Only a little."

"But still a little. That is good. There is no other language when you know Italian. *A domani*, then. Shall I meet you here, and then we can walk to the links together?"

"No, I have some sick people to see before I start, but I shall be passing The Homestead at ten o'clock."

"That is well. *Buona sera, Signorina.*"

But Signor Ricordo did not go back to The Homestead. Instead he walked up to the golf links, and spent hours on the great moors beyond. He seemed to be trying to weary himself, for he tramped from peak to peak, not seeming to care whither he was going. It was after midnight when he reached the house,

nevertheless he met Olive with a smile the next morning.

"I shall think that the world has libelled your English weather," he said almost gaily, looking up at the blue skies. "And now for the battle. I feel as though to-day will create a new epoch in my life."

Olive answered him by a pleasant laugh, yet she wondered what he meant.

CHAPTER XXV

THE COMING OF WINFIELD

NOTHING of importance happened during the golf match on the links. Neither Ricordo nor Olive played their best, and when the eighteenth green was reached both seemed relieved.

"What is the time, signore?" asked Olive.

"It is just after one, signorina."

"Then it is too late for me to go home to lunch," said Olive.

"That is well," said Ricordo. "You have made such excellent arrangements here that the matter of lunch can easily be dealt with. Moreover, unlike many clubs, you have not insisted on the idiotic rule of men and women lunching in different rooms. As a matter of fact, knowing we could not finish until one, I took the liberty of telling the good woman here that she must use her culinary skill on our behalf. I hope I have not done wrong."

Olive laughed gaily. The moorland air, the brightness of the skies, and the healthy exercise she had taken, had made her ravenously hungry.

"Rather, I must thank you heartily," she said; "but I must get back soon after lunch. I think I will send my caddy with a note, so that a trap may come for me."

"Is that essential?" asked Ricordo.

Olive looked at him questioningly.

"Because," continued Ricordo, "I had looked forward to the pleasure of walking back with you—if you will grant me so great an honour."

For a moment she hesitated. Had he been an Englishman she would have thought nothing of it. Her father had invited him to the house; he had also spoken of him as a kind of prince of merchants, and as a consequence there could be no doubt as to his position. Nevertheless, the fact that his education and associations had not been English, kept her from immediately acceding to his request.

"I ask this," went on Ricordo, "because I am afraid I conveyed a false impression on the night I was a guest at your father's house. Even a poor alien like myself does not desire to appear in a false light."

Her eyes met his as he spoke, and the force of her objections seemed to have fled.

"I thought you might wish to play again this afternoon," she said; "but if you wish, I shall be very glad."

An hour later they started to walk back to Vale Linden.

"I have sometimes wondered whether you do not regard me as somewhat of an enigma, signorina. You build a beautiful house for the benefit of people who need rest and change, but who cannot afford to pay for the comforts of a good hotel, and then you find that it is encumbered by a man who can abundantly afford to pay even for a few luxuries. No doubt that has struck you as strange?"

"I am afraid I have not thought much about it," replied Olive.

"Still, now that I have been received so kindly, I think I ought to explain. While I was in London I met a man, I had affairs with him, named—let me think, yes, Winfield. I grew tired of London, and he told me of this place, and of you. He described the work you had done here, and your gracious influence in the village and neighbourhood. His story appealed to me. I longed to see this beautiful Vale Linden, and being a lonely man without ties—well, that is all, I think, signorina. But now I am here, I want to stay—for a time at least. I recognise the fact that I can no longer benefit by—your boundless charity to the needy, and——"

"Surely, Signor Ricordo, there is no need for you to leave The Homestead."

"Yes there is, I could not stay there, when—well, many who may need your kindness are waiting for admission. But the place has come to have a charm for me, signorina. The quiet restfulness, the rustic beauty, the pure air—the associations have conquered me. I have wondered whether it would be possible for you to have me as a tenant, a neighbour. There is a delightful house which I am told was occupied by the steward of the late owner, and which is now empty. I would either buy it or rent it. Would it be possible, signorina?"

"That is scarcely a matter which falls within my province," replied Olive. "My father manages the estate. Since he has partially retired from business, it is his great hobby."

"Pardon me, signorina, everything depends on you."

"On me?"

"Yes. In this way. I could not think of remaining here unless the thought of it were pleasing to you. I am a lonely man, signorina, a man whose friends have either died or disappeared, and the thought of living in the same neighbourhood as yourself brings joy to me; but I would not do so, unless the scheme had your approbation."

They had by this time come to the road which led down the hill towards Vale Linden, and Olive was turning towards it, when Ricordo put out his hands as if to stop her.

"Pardon me," he said, "there is another path to Vale Linden. It is a little longer; it leads over the moors, and it is very beautiful. May I plead with you to take the longer road?"

Almost without demur, she consented. Although she did not realise it, the man had again exercised a kind of fascination over her. For the moment his will became hers. As for the man, he too seemed more than ordinarily interested. There was a tone of pleading and of intensity in his voice which she had never heard before. He was revealing himself in a new light.

"Thank you," he said, as they walked along the moorland path; "I almost hope that your consent to take the longer path augurs well for my plan. For your English life possesses a kind of charm for me, signorina. Yes, I who have known the East with its mystery, its great silent spaces, and its wondrous life, confess it. It has taught me the meaning of your English word 'home.' And I have never known it in practice, signorina—never."

"Still, I should think your life in the East must be very fascinating?"

A strange expression flashed across his face, but the smile on his lips was hidden by his thick moustache.

"Fascinating, great Allah, yes! I should like to tell you of it some time, signorina—the story of my life. It would interest you; yes, I promise you that it would interest you. It would take a long time, I am afraid, but you would listen, yes, you would listen to the very end."

He spoke quietly, but there was an intensity in his tone, and as he spoke Olive's heart began to beat more rapidly. Again she was reminded of Leicester, the man she had once promised to marry, and who had died more than six years before. She almost felt afraid, for it seemed to her that he was about to reveal some terrible secret. More than that, his personality impressed her, just as Leicester's did in the old days.

"Do you know," he went on, "why I did not accept your father's hospitality—that is, why I refused food and drink when I visited your house that night of the concert?"

"I suppose because you were not hungry, and, as you said, you never drink intoxicants," she said, uttering the first answer that came to her lips.

"No, it was not that. I know, too, that my action in refusing his cigars was rude. Even I know enough of your English laws of hospitality for that. I wanted to walk back with you to tell you about this. Shall I tell you?"

"I never thought of rudeness. I thought you meant what you said. Tell me, if you wish."

"I refused because I thought you resented my

presence. Forgive me if I misinterpreted your face. You looked as though you were angry with me, and angry at what I said."

"I am exceedingly sorry if any act or look of mine gave pain to a guest in my father's house. Nothing could be further from my wishes. Neither did I interpret your refusal to accept what was offered in that light."

"And yet you grew pale when I refused to take whisky."

Olive was silent.

"I will admit I should have done that under any circumstances," he went on. "There the Mohammedans have much superiority over Christians. Not that I am a Mohammedan—what religion I believe in is Christian; but whisky, no. The depths into which it has dragged so many are too deep. Nevertheless you grew pale as I mentioned it. I wondered why."

Still Olive did not speak. The dead past was rising all around her again, and yet, strange to say, she did not think of Leicester with tenderness. Rather, although the memories associated with him rose thick and fast, he himself receded into the dim distance.

"I am glad I was mistaken," went on Ricordo; "and may I also accept that as your consent to my approaching your father, with a view to my becoming your neighbour?"

"I am sure, if you decide to live here, I hope you will be very happy," said Olive.

"Thank you; you make my sun shine brightly," was the response. "Whether I shall live here much, I cannot tell, for the East always claims the man upon whom it has cast its spell. And it has cast its spell

upon me. Yes, some time I must claim your consent to tell you about my life there. I may, may I not?"

Before she realised what she was doing, she had given her consent. The man's presence suggested mysteries which she desired to know.

They had now turned down the hill, and were walking to Vale Linden. She was almost sorry that their walk would so soon come to an end, and she wished that he would tell her something of the past as they walked. But as they neared the village Signor Ricordo became moody and silent, so silent that their walk became almost painful. When they came to the park gates, however, he spoke again.

"It is kind of you to have pity on a lonely man," he said, "ay, and one who is a stranger, grown old before his time."

"Old, signore?" she said, with a laugh that was almost forced.

"Yes, old, signorina. How old should you think?"

She lifted her eyes to his face, and as she looked she felt a shiver pass through her.

"I should not like to hazard a guess," she said.

"No," he replied, "I suppose not; and yet, would you believe it, I am but little older than you. As I told you when first I saw you, I have been in hell; down in its very depths. And it ages a man—yes, it ages him, it gives him not years, but it gives him wisdom. Good-day, signorina."

Olive felt strangely depressed as he parted from her, and she found herself wondering at many things he said. Indeed, he was in her thoughts during the rest of the day. She was strangely interested in him,

and yet she had a kind of fear of him. He was different from the rest of her world, different from her father, different from Herbert Briarfield, different from any of the guests who had come to the house. In many ways he reminded her of Leicester, and yet from that day Leicester became more and more a memory to her.

A few days later she heard that Signor Ricordo had taken rooms at Linden Manor Farm, a rather fine old house, occupied by a farmer by the name of Briggs. Meanwhile her father told her that Ricordo had approached him with a view of buying the house concerning which he had spoken to her. After this they met occasionally, but not often; nevertheless, each time they met, Olive became more deeply interested in him. The fact of his coming from the East became less and less an obstacle to their friendship, and John Castlemaine, while he could never break through a certain kind of reserve which seemed to surround the man who had come to live in their midst, confessed that he was the most interesting personality he had ever met.

As the weeks passed by Olive realised that the time would soon arrive when Herbert Briarfield would claim the right to plead his suit for the last time, and she began to wonder what she would say to him. Since the occasion when he had pleaded this privilege, he had not visited her home often; but every time she had seen him he had revealed more and more what a fine manly young fellow he was. Certainly, as her father had told her more than once, she would soon have to decide whether she would remain single all her life, or whether she would accept the love he offered.

Yet, even as she thought of this, she wondered what Ricordo would say, and she thought also of the promise which she had made to Leicester on the night before the day on which they should have been married. For that promise still haunted her. She remembered the look on Leicester's face when he exacted the promise, and her assurance that, no matter what might happen, she would never marry another man was not to be easily forgotten.

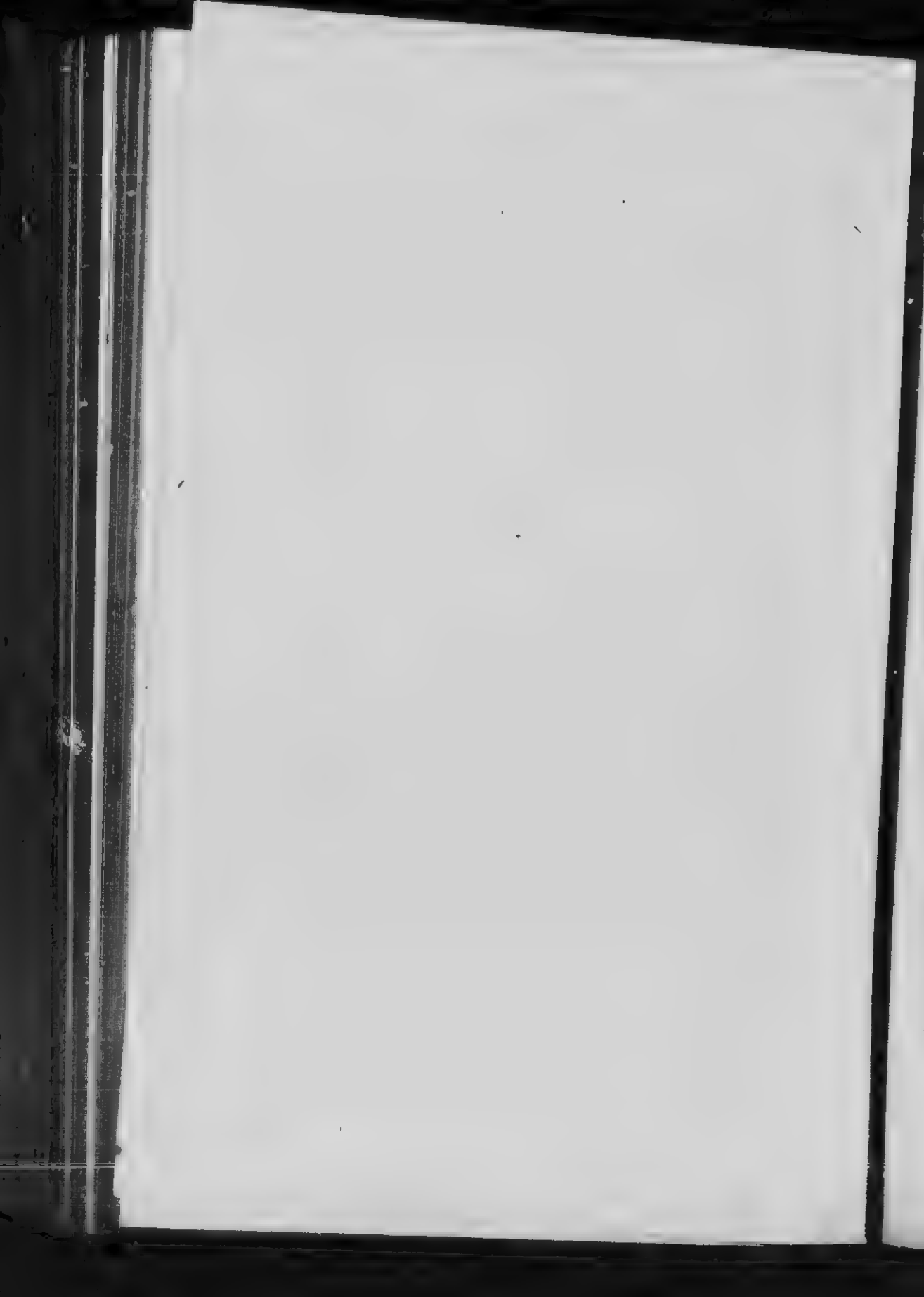
One morning Ricordo sat on the lawn outside the Manor Farm House. He had breakfasted in the open air, and was now sitting on a garden chair smoking a cheroot. Ricordo was still regarded as a mystery in the neighbourhood. No one knew anything more about him now than they did on the day of his arrival, save that he was a partner in a great Eastern trading firm. That he had plenty of money was beyond question. He had opened an account at the nearest bank, and the manager had opened his eyes with astonishment when he saw the amount written on the cheque that was presented to him. Of course this sum was not mentioned to the world, but the clerks at the bank made no secret of the fact that their new client was enormously rich. But beyond this nothing was known. The best houses for miles around had opened their doors to him; but Ricordo never entered them. Beyond calling occasionally at The Homestead, and at the great house at Vale Linden, he showed no desire for companionship. If he had left at the end of two months he would have been spoken of as the mysterious Eastern gentleman who wore a fez, and while all sorts of surmises would have been offered concerning him, nothing would have been known.

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This morning, Signor Ricordo lay back in his chair, smoking a cheroot. As usual, his eyes were nearly closed, and the same look of cynical melancholy rested on his face. Once or twice he picked up the previous day's paper, only to throw it aside. Evidently he had but little interest in the affairs of the country. Presently he lifted his head quickly, and saw the village postman coming towards him.

"Mornin', sur."

"Good-morning, Beel. Got some letters for me?"

"Sever'l, sur. 'Ere you be."

"Thank you."

The postman left him, and made his way towards the house.

For a time he sat deep in thought, not referring to the letters, but his face gave no indication as to whether his thoughts were pleasant or otherwise. It was as expressionless as the face of the sphinx. After a time he turned to the letters and glanced at them carelessly. At length, however, his eyes showed a glow of interest. He tore open one of the letters and read it almost eagerly :

"DEAR SIGNOR RICORDO,—At last I am able to accept your kind invitation, and by the time you get this I shall be on my way to Vale Linden. As I am starting by an early train I shall arrive at the station by one o'clock. I am simply longing to be amidst the beautiful scenery which you describe so eloquently, and more than all to have a long chat with you. All news when we meet.—Yours,

"A. WINFIELD."

"P.S.—I shall lunch in the train."

Certainly there was nothing in the letter of a striking nature, yet Ricordo walked up and down the lawn like one greatly moved.

"It is coming, it is coming," he repeated more than once.

Hastily scanning the other letters, he went into the house, and having carefully locked them in a safe, he went out on the moors and walked for many miles. By one o'clock he was at Vale Linden station, but no one would have judged that he had trudged a long distance that summer day. As he waited the coming of the train he looked as cool as if he had just dressed after a cold bath.

"Ah, Mr. Winfield, I am glad to see you," he said, as the train drew up at the platform, and Winfield got out. "I am rejoiced that you have come to participate in the beauties of this place. I owe you much for advising me to come here."

"It is good of you to ask me to come," said Winfield, "I find I can just squeeze out three days."

"Ah, longer, longer, my friend. By the way, are you tired? There is a man waiting here with a trap, if you would like to ride back."

"No, I would rather walk, if you don't mind," said Winfield. "The air is so delicious, and I have been in the railway carriage so long, that the thought of a country walk is enchanting."

"That is well. I will send back your luggage by the trap, and we will walk. A roundabout way, if you don't mind, over the moors."

"Just what I should like," said Winfield, and the two started.

While they were climbing a steep footpath which

led to the moors, little was said, but presently, when they had reached an eminence from which they could see a vast expanse of country, both drew breath.

"This is glorious," said Winfield; "it makes me feel ten years younger."

"I want to take you the loneliest walk in the district, and the most striking, Mr. Winfield," said Ricordo. "It will mean eight miles to my farmhouse that way; do you mind?"

"The longer the better," said Winfield. "What a glorious sight! Look at the roll of hill and dale, think of the glory of furze and heather! And the air is like some fabled elixir of life. You must be very happy here, signore."

"As happy as Lucifer when he was cast out of Paradise," said the other calmly.

Winfield looked at him curiously.

"You will have your joke," he laughed.

"I never joke," said the other.

"By the way," went on Winfield, "have you met the guardian angel of this place? You stayed at her home of rest for some time. I am told that she often visits it. Surely you must have seen her?"

"Yes, I have seen her."

"Well, and what is your impression? I knew her slightly, years ago."

"And what do you think of her?"

A shadow passed Winfield's face.

"I saw her under unpleasant circumstances," he said. "I am afraid I am not able to judge fairly."

"I have heard," said Ricordo slowly, "that she is a woman with a history. Gossips have it that she had an unhappy love affair years ago. Is it true? Not

that I pay much attention to gossip; but I thought you might know."

"Yes, I am afraid there is some truth in it."

"Tell me, *amico mio*."

Winfield was silent a second.

"Are you interested in her?" he asked.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"In a way, yes. I live on her lands; she is—well, the good fairy of the district. Yes, I am interested."

"I see no reason why I should not tell you," replied Winfield. "It is a matter of six years ago now, and the man is dead."

"Dead, eh? Who was he?"

"A fellow by the name of Radford Leicester."

"A good fellow? A pattern young man, eh?"

"No; anything but that. Nevertheless I liked him.

In many respects I suppose I was his best friend—perhaps his only friend. But there, I'll tell you. Leicester was a cynic, a drunkard, a man who, while I believe he lived a clean, straight life, laughed at morality and truth and virtue. A drunkard, did I say? Well, that is true and false at the same time. He was a slave to drink, and yet he never appeared drunk. Well, he had brilliant gifts, was a fine speaker, a close reasoner, and every one believed that if he would give up his vice, he might become a great man. As I said, he believed in nothing. He was an atheist, and scorned virtue. One night I was sitting with him, and two others, and he was taken to task for his——"

"Yes, I understand; go on."

"Well, he defended himself, and declared that there

was no woman on earth but had her price. The other two chaps, Sprague and Purvis by name, defended the women. Then Leicester offered to make a wager that he, a kind of pariah as he was, could win any woman they liked to name, provided he was able to pay the price. Then I named Olive Castlemaine. Leicester then offered to stake £100 that he would win her. He said that although she knew him to be a drunkard, an atheist, a cynic, a despiser of women, he would win her, by making her believe he would give her a high place in the land. After he had won her, he was to——"

"What you call jilt her," suggested Ricordo, as he saw Winfield hesitate for a word.

"Exactly. Well, he did win her. The day of the wedding was arranged. Meanwhile, Sprague and Purvis believed he was simply seeking to win his wager. Indeed, he confessed as much to them a week or so before the wedding. For my own part, I believe that although Leicester began in grim jest, he ended by being deadly in earnest."

"Yes, go on, my friend," said Ricordo, as the other paused. "I am greatly interested in your story. More interested than you can imagine. I will tell you why presently."

CHAPTER XXVI

REVELATIONS

"YES, I believe he really loved her. He gave up drink, and although to his acquaintances he seemed as cynical and faithless as ever, I saw a change had come over him. He chose me for his best man at the wedding. Well, on the eve of the wedding-day Miss Castlemaine got a letter, telling her the whole story. Personally, I believe Sprague wrote it. I suppose the letter seemed to prove up to the hilt that Leicester was simply playing the game to win his bet, and that although he was prepared to marry her, he was doing so because she was one of the richest heiresses in London."

"Well?"

"The wedding never came off. When he went to see her, she drove him from the house. I was there, and I saw and heard everything. I shall never forget Leicester's look as long as I live. I did my best for him, but in vain. She went abroad, and he—went to the devil."

"Tell me how, my friend."

"He flew to whisky; he gave himself over to the devil. Then the General Election came off, and he went to his constituency, only to fall down on the

platform, at a public meeting, in a state of maudlin drunkenness. He was hooted out of the constituency. Where he went, God only knows. But a few weeks later his body was found washed on the steps by Blackfriars Bridge."

"Ecco! that is almost a tragedy, eh?" and Ricordo laughed almost merrily.

"It was tragedy to me; for, to tell the truth, I liked him. I had seen more of him than perhaps any other."

"And she, my friend—did she grieve?"

"I don't know. I should think not. I heard that a few weeks later her father had bought Vale Linden and that she was making merry with her friends."

"Just like a woman," said Ricordo quietly; "but there is one thing which is not quite clear to me. Why, if she did not care, has she not married some one else?"

"Well, I am not quite sure if that is the reason, but she made a vow to Leicester the night before the day fixed for the wedding that she would never marry another man, no matter what might happen."

"And you think she is keeping the vow?"

"Possibly; I don't know."

"A very interesting story, Mr. Winfield. I think I could tell you one quite as interesting. And you say the man committed suicide?"

"Yes," said Winfield with a sigh.

"Why?"

"Well, I suppose he had nothing to live for. He was disgraced, he was hooted out of his constituency, he had alienated friends, and he had neither faith nor hope."

For a few minutes they walked in silence. Then Ricordo said :

"And was he the kind of man, Mr. Winfield, who, according to your thoughts, would commit suicide?"

"There can be no doubt about it. It is true the body was unrecognisable, but there were letters found on him by which he could be identified. Neither coroner nor jury had any doubts about it."

"Was he a weak, incapable man—a man without resource?"

"Great heavens, no! He was a man who could do anything. Had he known what was good for him, I believe he might have been Prime Minister."

"A man of weak will, eh?"

"No; rather a man of iron will, when he made up his mind."

"And he had vowed to marry this Miss Castlemaine?"

"Yes."

"And was he the kind of man to give up so easily?"

"I do not think you quite realise the circumstances."

"I am trying to realise the man."

"Yes; but the letters found on the body."

Ricordo laughed quietly.

"Did you say the body was identified? Was it recognisable?"

"No."

"Ah!"

"I was with him when he had given up all hope of ever winning Miss Castlemaine," said Winfield. "He was in a state of utter despair."

"A weak man might have committed suicide; but a strong man, who had made a vow like that—never!"

"You do not believe that Radford Leicester committed suicide?"

"I mean that such a man as you have described would rise again, even although he died."

Winfield shook his head, and sighed.

"You do not believe it?"

"I knew Leicester. I saw the state he was in. He was not a happy man before he met Miss Castlemaine, then—well, she became everything to him. Afterwards, when he had by his own act made everything impossible, what was left for him? He would say, 'Let me die, and have done with it.'"

Again Ricordo laughed quietly.

"Were this Sprague and Purvis friends of his?" he asked presently.

"No. He did not like either of them, and he vowed that if either of them ever breathed to Miss Castlemaine anything about the wager, he would be revenged on them."

"And was he the kind of man to leave that vow unfulfilled?"

"I believe he was in such a state of despair that he was tired of life," said Winfield.

"Then you believe that this Radford Leicester is dead?"

"Yes, I believe he is."

They were walking along a ravine. On either side of them rose steep, precipitous cliffs. At their feet a moorland stream gurgled its way to the River Linden.

"Winfield," said the other, in altered tones, "look at me closely. Forget the brown skin and the black beard. Picture me a little thinner and paler. Now, then, do you think Radford Leicester is dead?"

He took off his fez, and stood face to face with the man to whom he spoke.

"That's it, look closer—feature by feature. Now then, do you believe Radford Leicester is dead?"

"My God!" said Winfield.

"Ah," said the other quietly, "I thought you would recognise me if I put it to you truly."

"But—but——"

"Yes, you recognise my voice now. I am no longer the Eastern gentleman with the quiet, musical voice. The dead man has risen, eh?"

"But, I say, Leicester——"

"Not yet, Winfield. I am Signor Abdul Ricordo. I have an Italian father and a Moorish mother, and I speak English with an Eastern voice, and with a slight accent. But I speak your language well, don't I?"

"I—I can't believe it!" stammered Winfield.

"Yes, you can. Why"—and he moved his shoulders like the Leicester of old—"do you think I am a kind of thing fed on asses' milk, a poor, weak, pulpy thing that would allow myself to be the plaything of a woman and two cads like Sprague and Purvis? Did you believe that, Winfield?"

"Then you did not——"

"Die? No. I went to hell, but I did not die."

"But, I say—I am dazed, bewildered. I hardly know where I am. I have a feeling that I shall wake up presently and find that I have dreamed this."

The other laughed quietly, and Winfield detected the laughter of Radford Leicester of six years before.

"But, I say, Leicester, tell me—that is, tell me the—
—the meaning of it all."

The other looked around him almost fearfully. The

place was silent as death. No sound was heard save the gurgling of the moorland stream.

"Do not mention that name again, Winfield—at least, not yet. I am Abdul Ricordo. Ricordo, as you know, is an Italian word which means 'remember.' I remember, my friend; I remember. I have forgotten nothing; no, by heaven, *nothing*."

"But tell me, old man——"

"I say, Winfield, you do not seem glad. You do not congratulate me; you do not offer to shake hands, nor do you tell me how thankful you are that I did not throw myself in the river."

"You know, old man. It goes without saying. But I am shaken out of my reckonings. I hardly know whether I am on my head or my heels. Glad to see you! I am more than glad. I need not tell you now, what I told you just now when I did not know who you were. But I did not know it was possible that I could be so deceived; besides, I am in the dark about everything. Tell me, old man, tell me everything. That's right, don't put on that fez again. I can see you better without that. I remember the shape of the head now. Yes, and keep to your old voice, my friend—it helps me to feel I am on solid ground. Now then, tell me what happened."

"Winfield, I trust you. You were the only man who was faithful to me in the old days. You will be faithful still. Nothing that you have discovered, nothing that I shall tell you shall pass your lips, until I tell you that you may speak."

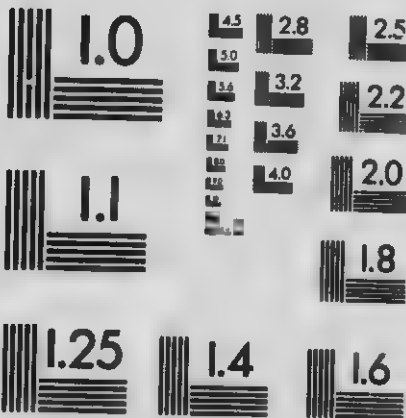
"I promise that, my friend. Nothing shall pass my lips—not a hint, not a suggestion."

The other put on his fez again. "That is understood,



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then," he said quietly. He spoke in the old fluid tones which he had adopted since he came to Vale Linden. "I say, Winfield, look at me again. I never forget, never—mind that."

For a moment Winfield had a feeling like fear. Perhaps it was because he had not yet recovered from the shock he had received.

"We will speak of Radford Leicester in the third person, if you please. I am still Signor Ricordo, mind that. Think of me as such till I tell you otherwise. Signor Abdul Ricordo, partner in the great Tripoli trading company, eh?" and he bowed to the other ceremoniously. "I am acting my part still. Presently I will change my attire and my part; then I will be what I was. Well, you wish to know about Radford Leicester. I will tell you. Yes, he did contemplate suicide; but little as he loved life, he loved it too much to put an end to it. Besides, he feared' what lay beyond what we call death. Is any man an atheist, *amico mio*? I think not. One night, while standing by Blackfriars Bridge, thinking of what would happen if he gave himself to the river, he saw a dead body washed on the steps. It was a bright night, and he saw that the man's face was unrecognisable; moreover, he saw that the thing had once been what is called a gentleman. Then a plan was born in his mind. After making sure that there were no marks of identification on what he saw—well, you see the rest. Radford Leicester read his own obituary notices. Ha! my friend, they were pleasant reading. He even went to his own funeral. He saw you there. Thank you, Winfield, for paying your last respects to your friend."

Winfield wiped the perspiration from his brow; it was many years since he had been so much moved.

"You were at the funeral!" he gasped.

"Radford Leicester was at the funeral. He read what a certain religious paper had to say about him. Many preachers drew profitable morals from his career. After all was over, he went away. He had made up his mind what to do. He had died, and he meant to rise again. He has risen again. He had a great battle to fight, Signor Winfield. You guess what it was. He had well-nigh conquered his enemy once for love of a woman, now he determined to conquer him completely, but from a different motive."

"Whisky," said Winfield.

"Whisky," repeated the other. "He knew that while it had dominion over him he would be the plaything of—anything. For two years he went where he could not get it."

"Where?"

"Some time he will tell you himself—that and other things. But he fought it, and he mastered it, not for love, but for something different."

"What?"

"Can't you guess? Think of the kind of man Radford Leicester was, Winfield. What do you think would be his motive?"

Winfield was silent.

"When you get down to the bedrock of this little human nature of ours, Winfield, you find that the same elemental passions exist, no matter what be our race or our country. Shakespeare knew it when he conceived the character of Shylock, and when he wrote

Othello. What do you think Radford Leicester would want to live for ? ”

“ You love her still ? ”

“ Love her ! As much as Shylock loved Antonio, my friend ; as much as any other man loves one who has lifted him into heaven only to hurl him into hell.”

“ Then you do not love her ? ”

“ Why should Radford Leicester love her, my friend ? Tell me that.”

“ Perhaps because he cannot help it.”

“ No ; he hates her because he cannot help it.”

“ Hate her ! ”

“ If there is one thing the East teaches a man, it is how to hate well. He has learnt his lesson. Great God, he has learnt it well ! ”

“ And why have you come back ? ”

“ Why should Radford Leicester come back, Winfield ? Tell me that. Think out the whole case quietly. Why should he come back ? That Bible of yours is full of human nature. Those old Jews realised the elemental passions of life—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That appeals to a man as just.”

“ But—but, I say——”

“ Yes, tell me.”

“ Think of what it means. It is not right.”

Ricordo laughed quietly.

“ Right, wrong. They are a part of the stock-in-trade of your moralists. Let a man go through what Leicester has gone, my friend, and even if he had a little respect for it before, it would all be crushed out of him. Why, man, Radford Leicester has lived the life of a slave in Morocco, and away out in the great

desert he has herded with wild beasts in the shape of men. He has seen the religion of the Christian and the Mohammedan and the Hindoo tested; he knows what it means. Do you think, after going through what he has gone, that your tawdry rag-tags of morality will have any weight with him? No, no; to hate is as natural as to love; and if love is right, so is hate."

"But, I say, old man——"

"Yes, go on."

"To put it in plain words, what you mean is this. When you realised that—that she—had cast you off—your love turned to hatred; that you played a grim joke on the world by making every one believe you were dead; that for six years you have brooded over what you believe to be your wrongs, nursing revenge all the time, and that you have come back to—to have, well, your revenge on the woman whom you once loved. Is that it?"

"It sounds melodramatic, eh? Just like a bit taken out of one of the old Adelphi melodramas. We used to laugh at them, didn't we, when we heard the pit and the gallery hissing the villain and cheering the hero. But even in those days I sympathised with the villain."

"But you don't mean that?"

"Why not?"

"It would not be right."

"Right! And even according to your smug morality, is it right for her to thrust a man where she thrust Leicester, to make him suffer the torments which he has suffered, and then to allow her to go unpunished?"

"Perhaps she has suffered."

"Suffered! Watch her even as I have watched her. Look at her smooth, fair face. There's not a line of care and suffering upon it. Hear her speak as I have heard her. Every word tells you she is without a care. Hear her laugh as I have heard her, and you would know that she thinks no more of having driven a man to his doom than a heartless gambler cares for the victim he has ruined."

"And you have risen from the dead for——"

"Just that, my friend, just that."

"What revenge?"

"One that shall be sufficient, Signor Winfield."

The two men walked on. Presently the gorge was behind them, and they stood up on the high moorland, while on every side stretched the wild, rugged countryside. The sun shone brightly, the air was sweet and clean, the birds sang joyously. Revenge seemed to be impossible amidst such surroundings.

"I say, Lei——"

"Signor Ricordo. Yes."

"How do you know I shall not go to her, and tell her——everything?"

"You couldn't do it, my friend. Do you think I didn't think it all out before I told you——what I have? How do I know you will not tell her? Because I know you. Besides, do you think it matters? Do you think you could baulk me? You do not know what is in my mind. You might tell her all you know—but that would not hinder me from carrying out my plans. No, no, I have not risen again to be frustrated a second time."

"Shall I tell you what I think?"

"I know. You think it would have been better if I had not risen, that you would have preferred for me to have died in the Thames, to coming back here to make her suffer as I have suffered. Very well, Signor Winfield, but that does not alter me."

"You mean that you will fulfil the threat you made to Sprague and Purvis?"

"I mean that I always try to pay my debts, my friend—always."

Again Winfield wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Even yet he could scarcely realise what had taken place. It seemed to him that all the foundations of his being were shaken.

"Give it up, Leicester."

"Give what up, my friend?"

"This mad scheme of yours."

"Mad! Nay, I've pondered over it for years. I've brooded over it in the silent places. I've suffered as few men have suffered, that I might gain the power that I wanted. No, my friend, I'll drag her as low as she dragged me. I'll make her feel the sting of scorn and insult as she made me feel it. She cared nothing for my disgrace, and do you think I'll stay my hand?"

"But how?"

"Not even to you dare I tell that, my friend. There are bounds, even to my trustfulness. But do not fear; it shall be sure, even if it is slow in coming."

"But, Leicester, you used to be a man. Even although you were cynical, and laughed at women's virtue, you were in your own way honourable, and chivalrous."

"Honour! Chivalry! I bade them good-bye years ago. Work with a gang of Arab ruffians for two

years, as I have done, and where would your honour and chivalry be?"

"But you did that of your own accord. She did not rob you of your fortune, or your liberty, or your life."

"She robbed me of hope, of faith—of all that from your standpoint makes life worth the living. Yes, I know, I was a slave to drink; I know. Perhaps I inherited the taste for it. I was an unbeliever, I laughed at standard morality—yes, all that. But I was still a man, Winfield. She had it in her power to make me even a good man. But when—she did what she did, she robbed me of everything—everything. I ceased to be a man; I became a devil. But for her I should never have sunk to the depths I have sunk to since. When she went out of my life, the devil entered me. Man, if I were to tell you all I've gone through since—I saw you last, you'd—but what's the use?"

For an hour more they talked, Winfield eagerly expostulating, and pleading, the other answering coldly and cruelly, but never raising his voice, or showing any signs of excitement.

"Then you are determined?" said Winfield at length.

"My friend, I never make a plan one day to give it up the next."

"Then you'll excuse me, I am sure."

"For what?"

"Nothing, only I am going back to London to-night. I cannot remain your guest, knowing what I know."

Ricordo half lifted his fez, and bowed mockingly.

"I am honoured by your society, even for a few hours, Signor Winfield," he said. "It has been

pleasant to talk about—old times, eh? I will tell the estimable Mrs. Briggs at the farm, who wisely rules her husband, to send back your luggage to the station. A busy editor—called suddenly back, eh? Good-day, Signor Winfield."

The other stood undecided.

"I say, Leicester, old man, will nothing move you?"

"Nothing, my friend, nothing. I have only one thing to live for now, and that I am going to have. It is a pleasant walk to the station, signore. I hope you will enjoy it."

Winfield turned away with a heavy heart. Twice he stopped as if undecided what to do, then, as if making a final resolution, he walked rapidly towards the station. As for the other, he stood and watched him until he was out of sight; but his face retained its relentless look, in his eyes was the wild stare of a madman.

"Even if I loved her as much as I hate her, I would still do what I set out to do," he said as Winfield passed out of sight.

That evening a servant at Vale Linden house announced that Signor Ricordo had called to see Miss Castlemaine.

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CHAPTER XXVII

RICORDO'S WOOING

OLIVE CASTLEMAINE was alone when the servant brought her the message, and for the first time since she had first met Ricordo, the news of his presence was not welcome. She wanted to be alone to think. That afternoon Herbert Briarfield had pleaded his cause once more, and she had promised to give him her answer in two days. For the first time since she had known him, moreover, she wanted to accede to his wishes. Not because her heart felt any warmer towards him, but because she thought of him as a friend and a protector. Whatever else he might be, he was a strong, healthy-minded man, one who would be faithful and loving. And almost for the first time in her life, Olive felt a longing for such an one. For a great fear had come into her heart—a fear of Signor Ricordo. She could not explain it, nor define it. The man had fascinated her—had, indeed, thrown a kind of spell upon her. She thought of him continually. Leicester had faded into the background of her life. But for the fact of her promise never to marry another man, he seemed to have passed out of her existence. But in place of Leicester, Ricordo had come, and although in one sense she regarded him

only as a casual acquaintance, she knew that in another sense he exercised a powerful influence over her. In considering Herbert Briarfield's plea, she thought of Ricordo. She feared what he might say; while she had a kind of feeling that she ought to consult him before coming to a final decision. Why this was so she could not tell. Signor Ricordo was only a distinguished foreigner who had come to live in the neighbourhood, and whom she had met only occasionally; and yet he was the most potent factor in her life. The fact almost angered her. Why should this middle-aged man constantly obtrude his personality upon her thoughts? Why should she care what he thought of Herbert Briarfield's proposal? But she did. Even that afternoon while he was pleading his love, she saw the dark face of the Eastern stranger.

Therefore while alone, thinking of what answer she should give to the young squire, a feeling like fear came into her heart as the servant announced the advent of Ricordo. She almost wished she had accepted Briarfield. She felt that he would protect her; that as his wife she would be free from the vague, indefinable fears which haunted her. Still, she would see him. No thought of telling the servant to send him away came into her mind. Indeed, although she feared him, she had a strange desire to talk with him.

When she entered the room where he was, she saw him rise with a stately bow. She thought he looked older than usual, while there was an expression in his eyes which she had never noticed before. Still, he spoke with his old easy grace, and he revealed nothing of the passion that burned in his heart.

"Will you excuse me for calling without an invita-

tion, signorina?" he said. "But, truth to tell, I saw something this evening which compelled me."

She looked up at him with a fast-beating heart, for there was something in his voice which struck her as strange.

"You wonder what it was," he went on. "I will tell you. I met Mr. Herbert Briarfield a little while ago."

In spite of herself she felt the blood rush to her cheeks, but she retained her self-control.

"Surely there is nothing so wonderful in that," she said.

"No, not in seeing him; the wonder was in what I read in his face."

At this she was silent, while Ricordo went on:

"Yes, I saw love, hope, there—nay, more than hope, I saw what looked like conquest, certainty. Am I right, signorina?"

Again she felt the kind of mastery which his presence always exercised over her; but she determined not to yield to it. Rather, she was almost angry with him.

"I am at a loss to know why you should ask me what you saw in his face," she said.

"Because what I saw depends on you," he answered quietly.

"And what then, signore?"

"I know that, if I saw truly, you have spoken words of hope. I know that he believes you have given him reason to think himself a victor. That is why, signorina."

"Still, I can scarcely understand why such a matter can interest you, signore."

"No? That is why I came, signorina. When I saw his face wreathed with smiles; when I looked into his eyes, lit up with the thought of victory; when I heard his voice ringing with gladness, it revealed something to me. Ah, you have not guessed it. Who am I—a poor alien—that I should think such thoughts? But no man is master of his heart, Miss Castlemaine. For, if I saw truly, and he is lifted into heaven, then I am hurled into hell. No, you do not think of this. Why should you? You regarded me as a mild-mannered foreigner, who had come to live in your beautiful neighbourhood. But did you think, when I told you that I wanted to stay here, that it was because of your scenery, your climate? You did not think that the fires of love could burn in my heart. Why should you? I dared not tell you. But your hills and dales are nothing to me; your healthful climate does not affect me; it was you—you who are everything. At first I tried to believe there was no danger. I laughed at myself for thinking of it; but when I saw the young squire's face, I could laugh no longer. I knew then that he had told you that he loved you, knew that he had asked you to be his wife; and then I could not rest—I could do nothing, but come to you and tell you. Listen, signorina, and of your goodness listen with kindness in your heart. You think of me as a man past his prime, as one who is middle-aged, cold-hearted. But you may remember that I told you I was but little older than you. It is true; I am but young in years; I have my life yet to live, and you will believe me, I am sure, when I tell you that never man felt towards a woman as I feel towards you. Signorina, I think of you always.

Ever since I first saw you I have thought of you. Never for an hour have you been absent from my thoughts, never for an hour. Asleep or awake there is but one face, one form which haunts me. Only one voice rings in my ears. I have fought against this feeling—only God knows how—but all in vain, all in vain. Before I saw Herbert Briarfield to-day, before—ah, long before—I had dreamed of our future, dreamed with a joy which is unknown to you, and which you cannot understand, and rather than give up those dreams, I would die. Oh, yes, I would much rather die."

His voice quivered with passion, his eyes blazed with a strange light. All his old cynical indifference was gone. There could be no doubt about it, he was fearfully, terribly in earnest. Olive felt this, and the very earnestness of his appeal moved her. But more than that, the man's personality mastered her. He seemed to fill the whole of her horizon. At that moment Herbert Briarfield faded into nothing; it was as though he did not exist, while the past was dim, far—far away.

"For the last hour, no one knows what I have suffered," he went on; "for the very thought of you being his wife is terrible to me. You do not know what all this means to me; you cannot know; I could not tell you. To give up the hopes, the dreams of years—to have them destroyed——"

"Of years?" questioned Olive quickly. She was glad of this mistake which he had made. Somehow it gave her a chance of speaking, of giving some little expression to the wild tumult of her heart.

"Of years," repeated the other quickly. "Ah,

you do not understand. I am an Eastern, and an Eastern thinks long, long thoughts. Like every man, I have dreamed of the woman I should love, and who should be all and in all to me; and do you know, signorina, that when out on the sands of the desert, all alone in the night, with the myriads of stars shining from the clear sky, I saw you. Yes, that was years ago. I remember it perfectly. No clouds flecked the wondrous blue of the sky, no moon shone, and yet the stars made darkness impossible. Nothing was to be seen around me but the wide stretch of sand, no sound stirred the silence. And I was alone, all alone with my heart and the Great Spirit of the desert. Then I saw your face, and heard your voice. Ay, as plainly as I have seen and heard this night. I knew I should meet you in reality. I dreamed of to-night then; I dreamed of what I should tell you, dreamed of what we should be to each other. Do you wonder, then, at what I felt as I saw the look in Briarfield's eyes, when I heard the laughter in his voice? What does he feel to what I feel? What are his hopes, his thoughts to mine? And so I come to you, signorina, and I ask you to forget him, to forget that he ever spoke to you. I ask you, nay, I plead with you—will you be my wife?"

Olive could hear the beating of her own heart, and she knew that Herbert Briarfield's pleadings were but as idle words compared with what this man had said. Nay more, she knew that although her fear for him had not left her, she could never marry the honest young Devonshire squire. Whether she loved Ricordo or no she was not sure, but she knew that the thought of him made it impossible for her to think of another.

All distinctions of race, of education, of associations were broken down. There was no such thing as race. This man loved her, and his love stirred her heart in a way she could not understand. Everything was wondrously real to her, and yet nothing was real. Somehow his voice seemed the voice of long ago. When Herbert Briarfield had spoken to her that day, the thought of her promise to Leicester did not seem real, save when she thought of what Ricordo would say, but now the past became vivid again. She had never felt that she must tell Briarfield anything concerning her love for Leicester, but she knew that if she were to promise to be the wife of Ricordo, she could hide nothing from him. His eyes would be like the eyes of a basilisk piercing her very soul.

"Will you?" continued Ricordo. "I ask in all humility, but I cannot, no, I cannot take a refusal. I cannot conceive that you would cast me into darkness. You will fulfil the dream of my life, you will translate the dream into reality. Tell me, signorina, tell me!"

She looked into his face, and was frightened. He looked pale, in spite of years spent under an Eastern sun; his voice quivered, his hands trembled.

"I cannot answer you to-night," she replied. "I must have time to—to think."

"But when, when?" he asked.

"To-morrow—yes, to-morrow at this time."

"To-morrow night then—at this time I will be here. Good-night, signorina."

He walked away without another word. When he reached the park, instead of going down the drive, he turned away towards the golf links. Crossing the

River Linden by a little wooden bridge, he climbed the hill, and presently he reached the broad expanse of moors. Then, and not until then, did he manifest any feeling whatever.

No one was near, the great moors were desolated by the night. Birds, and beasts, and flowers were asleep. The night winds swept gently across the spaces, making a kind of sad music. The man laughed aloud—a wild, harsh laugh. There was a kind of joy in the laugh, but it was unholy joy. It was the laugh of a man who believed he had succeeded in an evil thing—such a laugh as Mephistopheles uttered when he watched the ruin of Faust and Marguerite.

For hours he tramped the heathery moors; he seemed to rejoice in the silence of the night, in the loneliness of the region.

"To-morrow night," he said at length. "My answer is to come to-morrow. After six years I will hold her in my arms again. Six years! Great God, what I have been through in that time! Six years ago she drove me away from her, and she destroyed everything that was good in me, but now my time is come!"

For the first time for years he was unable to sleep that night. Hour after hour he tossed in his bed, and then presently, when the first dawn of morning appeared, he rose and went to the window.

How quiet and peaceful everything was! Save the faint twitter of the birds, who had not yet begun their glad thanksgiving chorus, and the gentle ripple of the river, no sound was to be heard. The valley lay in a light, thin haze, the dew hung on millions of blades of grass, the air was sweet with the purity of the morning. It seemed impossible for any one to cherish dreams

of vengeance amidst such a scene, but there was no softening in Ricordo's eyes.

He dressed quickly and went out. The sun had now risen, and all nature had burst into new life. Everywhere the birds poured forth their song of praise, the lambs sported in the meadows, the attle eagerly ate the dewy grass; everywhere life was a joy. He looked across the valley, and up on the hillside where Olive's home could be seen between the trees. The peacefulness and beauty of the scene seemed to affect him. A look of wonder came into his eyes, and there was an expression on his face difficult to describe. But it quickly passed away.

"No, no," he cried, "there is no hope for me. There is nothing worth living for now, save that. Oh, how I hate her!"

When he came back to breakfast, he was still the same polite but cynical man whom Mrs. Briggs had grown accustomed to.

"Beautiful mornin', sur. 'Tis lovely 'ere in the summer."

"But the winter will come, Mrs. Briggs."

"Then lev us enjoy the summer while we've a-got it, sur."

"You are a philosopher, Mrs. Briggs; but each must enjoy in his own way."

"Iss, tha's true; but I d'often feel as 'ow Vale Linden must be somethin' like the Garden of Eden where our first parents lived together."

"But the serpent came in, Mrs. Briggs."

"Iss, he ded. But you know the promise: 'The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head.' And it did, ya know, sur, it did."

"The serpent seems to be pretty much alive," remarked Ricordo.

Throughout the whole day he tramped the moors. Taking with him a pasty which Mrs. Briggs had baked, he stayed the entire day alone, and did not return until the sun was beginning to set behind the western hills. At precisely the same time as he had visited Vale Linden Hall the night before, he again approached the house. He was on the point of ringing when he saw Olive sitting beneath the broad-spreading branches of a great tree.

Eagerly he walked towards her.

"Signorina," he said eagerly, "I come to know my fate. On your answer depend the issues of my life. Am I to be lifted into paradise, or am I to be cast away into outer darkness?"

Olive was silent for a moment, then she said:

"Before I can answer you, signore, I have a confession to make."

"A confession!" he said. "Oh, but I shall be a very lenient confessor, if at the end—but you know what I would say. It would weary you to repeat what I said last night, neither is there need that I should. Surely you know what is in my heart. Since I saw you last night, no sleep has visited me. Half the night I tramped the moors, the other half I tossed sleeplessly on my bed. How could I sleep when I do not know what my future will be? Never mind the confession, signorina—tell me to be happy."

"I do not think I can," she replied.

"But you must, you must," he cried imperiously. "I tell you I will sweep away your objections like the

wind sweeps away thistledown. You do not know what your refusal would mean to me."

"There is something I must tell you," she said quietly. "Last night you asked me to be your wife; at least let me tell you why—why I do not think I can."

A strange smile passed over Ricordo's face.

"Yes, tell me," he said quietly.

"I cannot marry you, because I promised I never would."

"Promised you would never marry me!" he cried. "Promised who?"

She told the story which we already know, little thinking of the effect it had upon her hearer. She omitted no detail which had any importance in the story. The man's presence caused every incident to come back to her with painful vividness. The past lived again. Sometimes it seemed to her that not a stranger, but Leicester, stood beside her while she spoke.

"And you loved this man—this—this Leicester?" he asked presently.

"Yes, I think so—that is, I must have loved him, or I should never have promised to be his wife."

"And you gave him up because he was a bad man?"

"Because he insulted me. Because he did not seek me because he loved me, but because he would win his wager. How could I do otherwise?"

"But he loved you really—that is, afterwards?"

"He said so; but how did I know? He told—those men that it was only to win the wager."

"And he explained to you that for him the jest had become an earnest purpose?"

He spoke quietly, as though he were a judge sifting evidence.

"Yes, but when I accused him of having admitted to those—men, less than a month before the wedding-day, that he only sought to win the wager, he could not deny it."

"And then you cast him off?"

"I told him I would never see him again."

"And he—what became of him? Ah yes, you told me, he dragged your name before a public meeting, he fell down drunk on the platform at a public meeting—and then he committed suicide."

"Yes." She shuddered as she spoke; she never felt the tragedy of the circumstance as she felt it now.

"And before the day fixed for your wedding, you promised never to marry another man?"

"Yes."

"And that is the reason why you have never married?"

She did not resent this mode of putting questions to her. Somehow she felt he had the right. He had asked her to be his wife, and he had the right to know. Besides, she was strangely wrought upon. If he had not slept since the previous night, neither had she.

"Yes—no," she answered—"that is, I have never met any one that I cared for—enough to marry."

"Then you love this man—Leicester—still?"

"No."

"He is nothing to you now?"

"No, I do not think so."

"You have never felt that you treated him harshly, unfairly; that you did not give him a chance of proving to you that his love was real?"

"What could I do?" she asked. "No woman with self-respect could consent to be treated in such a way. He had deceived me once, how could I trust him again?"

"How indeed?"

She looked at him quickly. She could not understand the tone of his voice, and again a great fear possessed her. He seemed to have mastered her will, rather than her heart. She stood almost in awe of this man whose life was still a mystery to her, but who had, in a way she could not understand, made her feel that he was all the world to her. For he had done this, and yet in her heart of hearts she did not feel that she loved him.

"Did it ever strike you," he went on, "that this man—Leicester, I think you call him—did not commit suicide?"

"But he did!"

"How do you know?"

"The papers—the coroner's inquest, the—that is, there could be no doubt. Letters addressed to him were found on his dead body."

"I was only considering it from the standpoint of one who is terribly interested in all this, more interested than even you can think. For your story has a vital meaning to me, signorina; you can imagine that. How can it be otherwise, when your answer to my plea means so much? For let me tell you this, although your refusal would mean more to me than anything you can dream of, I would not marry a woman half of whose heart was buried in the grave of another man. May I ask you another question, signorina?"

She nodded her head, wondering and fearing, she knew not why, what it would be.

"Suppose this man were not dead, supposing he is still alive, and were to come back, repentant perhaps, and reformed—would you marry him now?"

"No, no, never." She uttered the words eagerly.

"He is nothing to you now?"

"His memory is a black shadow on my life."

"But only a shadow?"

"That is all."

"In a sense, you have forgotten him, then?"

"Yes, he has—lately become—as—as nothing to me."

"Since how long?"

She did not answer.

"Signorina," and he spoke very gently, "is it since—since that day I spoke to you first up on the hills yonder?"

She did not reply, but she knew that his question contained the truth.

"You will be my wife, signorina? Forgive me if I cannot tell you all that is in my heart. But it is the dearest wish of my life—nay more, all I hope for, all I live for, depends on your answer. Let that story be forgotten. There, it is gone for ever. Tell me that you will be my wife."

"But my promise," she said weakly.

"Your promise—what is it?" he laughed. "A promise made in a moment of excitement, made when you did not realise what it meant. You did not think he would die, and since he is dead—what does it avail? That is all gone. It has no meaning. It has no more binding power than a gossamer thread. You must be mine. I was led here that this hour might come. You will be my wife, signorina?"

Still she hesitated, and then the man pleaded again,

pleaded with burning words, and as he spoke barriers seemed to break down one by one. Her fear passed away, her heart grew warm again. He seemed to cast a kind of spell on her once more, and she had no desire to refuse him.

"You will be my wife," he said, "you will fulfil the dreams of years, you will bring light and joy into my life—say you will—Olive."

She held out her hand and looked up into his face, and then he caught her in his arms; but even as he did so it seemed as though the dead past came back again, and that it was Leicester, and not the stranger, who held her to his heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SECOND MEETING OF THE CYNIC AND THE COUNTRYWOMAN

"YOU'LL be back for your lunch, Mr. Ricordo?"

"No, Mrs. Briggs. I'm going for a long walk, a very long walk; I don't know how far."

"But you'll be back for dinner to-night?"

"Don't expect me till you see me."

The simple countrywoman looked up into his face, and although she did not know why, she thought she saw a change in him. The old look of cynical melancholy was gone, the eyes were no longer half closed, but wide open, eager, expectant.

"Did 'ee sleep well last night, sur?"

"I had strange dreams, Mrs. Briggs, very strange."

"Pleasant, I hope, sur."

"They were very strange, very wonderful. Good-morning, Mrs. Briggs. Don't be anxious about me."

He left the house and took the road up to the golf links. When he reached the top of the hill, he stopped and took a long look at Olive's home. He knew she expected him this morning; he had told her that he would come and ask her father to consent to her becoming his wife. But he did not intend going; he wanted to be away among the moors, he wanted to

think. His last evening's experiences had meant more to him than he knew. Mrs. Briggs was right when she thought she saw a change in him. The world yesterday and the world to-day were different, and he was different. He was no longer the thoughtful, melancholy Eastern gentleman who called himself Ricordo; he was Radford Leicester. Not only had he risen from the dead, but the past had risen. The buried years seemed to be with him again, in a way he could scarcely realise.

When he had left England long years before, he had left it with one thought in his mind. He would go away only to return again, and he would return only to be revenged on the woman he had loved. For his love had turned to hatred. As he had loved passionately, and with all the fervour of his nature, now he hated with as much intensity. For a few weeks he had lived in paradise only to be cast into an inferno, all the more ghastly because of the paradise in which he had lived. Through her he had become disgraced, through her he had become the byword of all who had known him. He had been a proud man, and this woman had wounded his pride, she had wounded his sense of justice, she had aroused all that was evil in him. And he had vowed vengeance. Revenge is one of the primitive passions of humanity, and when Leicester found himself cast on the sea of life, without anchor or rudder, he determined that he would make Olive Castlemaine suffer as he had suffered. His disgrace should be hers. If he had been the byword for all who had known him, so should she.

At length when the time was ripe he came to England again. In his mind only one thought held

possession in his heart, only one feeling was dominant—his hatred for the woman whom he had once loved should find expression. When he came to Vale Linden, and saw how matters stood, he formulated his plans. The thing he had conceived was cruel, but he had gloated over it. After all, the veneer of civilisation counts for very little. Rob a man of religion and he is only a savage, with a savage's instincts and desires. The Mosaic code expresses the natural bent of the heart; "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." For years Leicester had brooded over his vow, and now the debt should be paid to the uttermost farthing. No thought of pity or of mercy came into his mind. He felt he had been wronged; love had turned to hatred, and he would be revenged. The savage in him was covered by the thin veneer of civilisation, but it was there.

He seemed in a strange mood as he walked rapidly across the moors. Sometimes he laughed quietly, as though some pleasant thought possessed him, and again he became moody, stern, and silent. But he was no longer the "Eastern gentleman with a fez." The day was warm, and he had clothed himself in a suit of light flannels, and instead of a fez he wore a panama. In spite of his black beard and brown skin he would no longer be taken for an Eastern. Every movement was that of an athletic Englishman. He was no longer acting a part; the old life was soon to come to an end, and he would begin anew. What that new life was he hardly dared to confess even to himself, but it was there, in the background of his mind.

"I have won, I have got my way, I have conquered," he said again and again as he strode along. "God, if

there is a God, is giving me my revenge. And if there is any justice in the world, it is just."

Hour after hour he walked ; he seemed to be trying to tire himself, so, in some way, throw off the abundant energy that surged within him. Presently he came to a shady dell, where he stopped. At his feet gurgled a stream of clear water. He lay flat on his face and took a long, deep drink.

"I wonder what whisky would taste like now," he said to himself. "It is six years since I touched it, six years ; but the first year was a year of torment."

He shuddered at the thought of it. The memory of the time when it held him enslaved was terrible to him even yet.

"But I conquered it," he went on ; "I vowed I would, and I have. Had the struggle been ten times as hard, I would have conquered it. No man is master of anything if whisky masters him."

He sat down beneath the tree and ate a simple lunch, then, taking another deep draught of the water, he continued his walk. A high hill was in front of him covered with gorse and bracken. In a few minutes he reached the top, and then he looked around him.

A look of recognition came into his eyes. He saw the cottage at which he had stayed after he had been driven out of Taviton ; away in the distance was the pool which the country people said was haunted by the devil. He remembered it when he saw it last as dark and forbidding, but to-day it gleamed in the sunlight. Below him, not much more than a mile away, was the farmhouse in which he had sheltered himself from a storm, when he was planning what he should do with his life.

Scarcely without knowing why, he turned his footsteps towards the farm.

"I wonder if the woman lives there still?" he said to himself. "Let me see, what was she called? Yes, Mrs. Pethick, I remember now, and she talked religion to me. She believed in it, too!"

He cast his mind back over the years again, and remembered what the woman had said to him.

"I wonder, I wonder if there's anything in it, after all?" he said with a sigh.

Everything was quiet at the farmyard when he came to it. A sheep-dog lifted his head sleepily and prepared to growl, but, seeing a well-dressed man, decided that all was well. The chickens crouched beneath the shade of a tree; evidently the day was too warm for them to care to seek for food. Nothing was to be heard save the hum of insects and the occasional chirp of a bird. It was far warmer there in the farmyard than up among the moors where he had been walking.

Leicester walked up to the kitchen door and knocked.

"Come in," said a voice which, in spite of the years which had elapsed, Leicester remembered.

He opened the door and walked in. He recognised the kitchen at once—the cool slate floor, the huge chimney-place at the end, and the long deal table. Then a huge fire leaped up the chimney. Now there were only a few red embers, on which a kettle sang merrily.

Mrs. Pethick appeared as he entered. She was but little altered; the six years had sat lightly upon her, and she looked the same healthy, buxom country-woman that she had looked then. And yet Leicester thought

he saw a sadder look in her eyes, and he wondered why it was.

"I wondered if you would sell me a glass of milk ma'am," he said by way of introducing himself.

"Glass ov milk," she replied. "You c'n 'ave so much milk as you mind to, but I s' can't zell a drap a milk. 'Twud'dn be vitty."

"You mean that you won't take any money?" said Leicester.

"To be sure I wa'art. I shud be shaamed to look 'ee in the faace, ef I wos to taake yer money fer a drop o' milk."

Leicester laughed at the woman's vehemence.

"Have 'ee come from far then, sur; you do look 'ot and tired?" she continued.

"Yes, I have walked a good many miles—from Vale Linden. Have you ever heard of it?"

"Iss, I've 'eerd ov it, but I've never been there. Why, that must be more'n twenty mile."

"Very likely. I've walked from there."

"And how be 'ee goin' back?"

"I'm going to walk."

"Good gracious! Why—but wudden 'ee ruther 'ave a cup of tay, sur?"

"I am afraid it would be troubling you."

"Trouble! Nothin' of the sort. Besides, I be goin' to 'ave one myzself. Ef you'll jist wait two or three minits 't 'll be ready. There, you go and set in the armchair there, while I d' git et."

For the first time he realised that he was tired. He accepted the woman's invitation, and sat down. How quiet and peaceful everything was! Not a sound save the ticking of the eight-day clock and the kettle

singing on the glowing embers. A little later Mrs. Pethick laid a snowy cloth on the end of the table nearest Leicester, and then brought a loaf of white bread and a basin of clotted cream.

"There now," she said presently, "draw yer cheer up and 'ave some tay; 't 'll be better than cloggy stuff like milk on a 'ot day like this."

It did not seem strange that this woman should treat him so kindly. He knew that her hospitality was nothing uncommon in rural districts. Nevertheless, he felt thankful to her. The sight of her face did him good.

"Es the tay to yer likin', then?" she asked.

"It is beautiful tea," he replied. "As for your Devonshire cream, 'tis delicious."

"I'm glad you like 'et, but I'd allays call et Cornish craim. I've lived 'ere now better'n twenty 'ear, but I can never make out that I bean't in Cornwall. I caan't fer sure. I was raired there, you zee. 'Ave 'ee ever bin to Cornwall then, zur, maakin' so bowld?"

"Never."

"Then you shud, zur. Some people do like Devonshire best, but I've never seed nothin' in Devonshire so purty as Truro revver. Besides, I do miss the Cornish revivals, I do."

"Revivals?"

"Iss; I was converted at a revival, I was. Not but wot we do 'ave good meetin's over to the Brianite Chapel, but ted'n like Cornwall. Be you a perfessor yerself then, sur?"

"A professor?—what of?"

"Of religion, zur. Be 'ee a perfessin' Christian?"

"I'm afraid not," he replied.

"Ah," she said, "I thot I ded'n see the joy of the Lord in yer eyes."

Try as he would, he could not help laughing. But there was nothing derisive in his laughter. The woman was too sincere.

"I am afraid I've seen too much of the devil to have the joy of the Lord," he replied.

"Aw, my deear," she said, dropping into the Cornish vernacular, "you do mind me of a gen'l'man wot called 'ere years and years ago, afore my 'usband and my pore dear boy died."

"Oh," said Leicester, "what gentleman?"

"Not that you be anything like en," assured Mrs. Pethick. "Aw, my deear, 'ee was as pale as a ghost, and as thin as a coot, 'ee was. Not but wot 'ee was a fine 'an'some gen'l'man, for oal that. 'Twas, lev me zee, six years ago, this last spring. Aw, 'ee ded talk funny, he ded. He zed 'ee loved the devil, 'ee ded, and towld me 'ow the devil tempted un to go to Crazzick pool, and sink, and sink, and sink, and thus find paice."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I towld un that 'ee'd never find no paice that way. Ther's no paice 'cept in the dear Lord. I'm sorry you be'ant a perfessin' Christian, sur."

It did not seem strange to Leicester that she should talk in this way. It seemed natural to her. Besides, in the rural parts of Cornwall and Devonshire, religion is the main topic of conversation among those who love the little roadside chapels.

"Well, as I was a-sayin'," she went on, "this gen'l'man ded zay funny things. He zed 'ee'd nuther father, nor

mawther, nor wife, nor sweetheart, and that he ded'n care nothin' 'bout livin'. And then all ov a sudden he axed me wot I wud do ef I wos in his plaace."

"And what did you tell him?" asked Liecester.

"I towld 'im that he must seek the Lord, and fight the devil. Ther's no other way fer et, sur."

"And did he, do you think?"

"I'm feard not, sur. For afterwards it comed to me who he was. I d' believe he was the gen'leman who tried to git into Parliament for Taviton. I s'pose 'ee wos a awful character. He decaived 'is young laady, he was a ter'ble drunkard, and then afterwards, he thrawed hissself in the revver up to London. 'Twa'sn' he that ded conquer the devil, but the devil conquered he. Ah well, the poor thing es ded now ef 'twas 'ee; 'tes a sad pity."

"And do you believe if he'd sought the Lord, as you call it, that he would have conquered the devil?"

"I doan't believe, sur, I'm sure."

Again Leicester became interested in the country-woman's simple talk. There was such a ring of sincerity in her voice, that he could not but be respectful.

"Mrs. Pethick," he said, "I've been in many countries, and known many religions, but I don't find that the devil is easily killed."

"The Lord Jesus can do et, sur."

"How do you know?"

"Knew, sur! I do know the difference in my heart before I was converted, and after. Besides, there was Aaron Goudge; you doan't know Aaron Goudge, I s'poase?"

"No, I don't know him."

"Well, ef you do look out of the winder you ca zee his 'ouse. Aaron was a ter'ble character, 'ee wa. He killed his wife, 'ee ded. Ah, poor critter, she de live a life! Not as you may say oal to wance h ded'n kill her, but little by little. She jist faade away, she ded. Aaron was a poacher too, and use to stail things. He was allays a-gittin' drunk an fightin'. He was a terror to the parish, he was. Aw many es the time I've talked to un, bit 'twas oal n use. Grace ded'n tich his heart, so to spaik. Ther after his poor wife died, his maid got into trouble, and ef there wos wawn thing in life Aaron cared 'bout, 'twas this maid, and the man that ruined her was Bill Liddicoat, Squire Hency's gamekeeper. Nothin' could be proved 'gin un, and then, to maake matters wuss Bill Liddicoat caught Aaron poachin', and he wos put to gaol. When Aaron comed out ov gaol, I spoke to un, and tried to do un good. 'Mrs. Pethick,' ses 'ee, 'I've sould myself to the devil to do fer Bill Liddicoat. I've offered un my soul, ef 'ee'll 'elp me, and 'ee've promised to. And I tell 'ee what, I'll never rest till I've paid out Bill Liddicoat, ef I've got to swing fer it, and ef I've got to go to hell for it, I'll be square with un.' 'But what good'll that do 'ee?' ses I. 'Tes oal I've got to live fer now,' ses 'ee, 'and I b'leeve I cud be 'appy ef I cud pay en out. And I wil! too, by God, I will!' I tried to raison weth un, but 'twas no use. You cud zee murder in 'is eyes, as he walked the roads. Then wawn mornin', we 'eard 'ow Bill Liddicoat was vound up in Ternouth woods in a pool of blood. He wad'n dead, but the doctors ded'n give much 'ope ov his life. Aaron was tooked up, and tried, but nothin' could be proved agin him. He proved wot is

called a allyby—that es, he made out that he was zum plaace else that very night."

Leicester listened eagerly to the story.

"And was he ever found out?" he asked.

"No, as you may zay he wos never vound out. But aw, my deear, wot a way 'ee wos in. You never seed such a gha'tly faace as 'ee 'ad. Ef ever the devil 'aunted a man, it was Aaron. He went as thin and pale as a ghoast. In a way he 'ad 'is rights in payin' out Bill Liddicoat, but he suffered the torments of the lost. He wudden tell nothin' and nothin' cud be proved agin un, but 'ee wos the most miserable man that ever walked the earth. Wawn day I spoked to un, but 'ee wudden zay nothin,' but 'The devil's a 'ard maaster, Mrs. Pethick.' I axed un to come to chapel, but he wudden come. Night after night I wrastled in prayer fur un, but 'ee wad'n altered. He jist went round like a man weth a 'alter round 'is neck. I've been the class laider up to the Bible Christian Chapel for a long time, and one night we zed as 'ow we would agree to pray fer Aaron, and we ded. For two weeks we prayed, and then wawn Sunday night Aaron comed to chapel. The praicher ded'n come that night, so we turned the sarvice into a prayer-meetin'. Oa, Aaron was convicted of sin, but 'ee wur n yield for a long while; but after a time he got 'pon his knees, and began to cry, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' But he ded'n git no liberty. 'Wy caan't I git paice?' he cried. So I said, 'Ef we repent ov our sins, He is faithful and just to fergive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' 'Wot do 'ee main by repent?' ses 'ee. 'Be sorry fer all the wrong you've done,' I sed; 'make yer paice with man

and God, and fergive everybody, and then trust in the mercy of the Lord for salvation.' 'Wot! fergive Bill Liddicoat?' he zed; 'never!' 'But you've paid un out,' I zed; 'surely you can fergive un now.' 'Ow do you know I've paid un out?' he asked. 'The Lord tould me,' I said. For a long time he was hardened then he said, 'Lord, ef You'll fergive me, I'll fergive Bill Liddicoat.' And still 'ee ded'n git no paice. At this my faith was a bit shaken; then it comed to me that I hadn't quoted the Scripture right, so I repeated et agean. 'Ef we confess our sins,' I sed. 'Confess wot?' ses 'ee. 'Confess wot you've done to Bill Liddicoat, and ax un to forgive 'ee,' I sed. 'Wot, ax Bill Liddicoat to forgive me?' he said; 'wot, 'ee that 'ave ruined my little maid? I'll burn in hell first.' 'If ye fergive not men their trespasses, neither will your Heavenly Father forgive your trespasses,' I said. 'Is that in the Bible?' ses 'ee. 'Our dear Lord said it Himself,' I replied. Oh, the struggle was terrible. 'I've bin in hell for weeks,' ses 'ee, 'ever since I tried to kill Bill. I thought ef I 'ad my revenge I should be 'appy, but I was in hell.' Then oal of a sudden he cried out, 'Lord, ef You'll give paice, ef You'll make a new man ov me, I'll do wotever You want me to. I'll forgive Bill Liddicoat, I'll ax un to forgive me, I'll confess that I tried to kill un. 'T's ter'ble 'ard, but I'll do et.'"

Mrs. Pethick stopped in her recital, and looked at the eager face of the man who was watching her.

"Would you believe et, sur, his faace changed in a moment. He seemed to become like a little child. Then he got on his feet, and praised the Lord. That was five years ago, and Aaron Goudge is a local

preacher now, and the happiest man in the parish. As for Bill Liddicoat, well, sur, he got better, and now Aaron's maid is his wife. Tha's wot the dear Lord Jesus can do fer a man, sur."

Leicester made no reply. He tried to think of something mocking to say, but the words would not come. It seemed to be impossible to call up a sneer in the face of the woman's simple faith.

"Plaise forgive me, sur, for talkin' like this. But I was prayin' when I heerd you knock; besides, in a way you do make me think of the poor gen'l'man that comed 'ere years ago, and wot throwed 'isself into the revver afterwards. As I sed to 'ee, ef we doan't conquer the devil, 'ee'll conquer we. You be'an't offended, be 'ee, sur?"

"Offended? Certainly not." He tried to laugh, but somehow the laugh died on his lips. "But you see, it's—it's a long time since I heard any one talk like this."

"Es et, sur? Ah, but the dear Loard Jesus es oal I've got to live for now. Four years ago my 'usband died, and then my boy was killed in the war. I felt 'ard and bitter for a little time. But 'tes oal right, I shall meet them again. They will not come to me, but I shall go to them."

Leicester rose to his feet, and looked for his hat.

"You wa'ant 'ave another cup of tay, sur?"

"No, thank you."

"You'll forgive an old woman, sur, and I know I'm very bould in spaikin' to 'ee, and I'm fast baitin' on for sixty, but you do'ant look 'appy, sur. I'm tould sometimes that I talk too much 'bout the Lord Jesus, but He's all I've got now, and d'reckly you comed into the

'ouse, I had a feelin' that you wad'n 'appy. Be sur? "

"No, great God, no," and Leicester seized his hat as though he were angry.

"Then you do'ant mind an old woman prayin' 'ee, do 'ee, sur? "

"Yes, pray for me, I need it," he said. "Thank you very much for the tea, and, by the way, I want you to give something for me to your chapel."

He gave her a sovereign, and walked away. A few minutes later he was out on the moors again.

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CHAPTER XXIX

GOD AND THE MAN

WHEN he reached the top of the hill he drew a long, deep breath. Away on every hand stretched the fine, undulating country—patches of wood, homely farmsteads, well-cultivated fields, and broad stretches of moorland. It was a day to rejoice in, it was a scene to revel in; but Leicester did not rejoice. And yet he had gained that for which he had struggled. Olive Castlemaine had promised to be his wife, and thus he would be able to wreak the vengeance over which he had brooded. Last night the thought had brought him a cruel, savage joy; that morning even he had gloated over the thought of his revenge; but now all was different. Suppose he had his way, suppose he played the game he was playing to the bitter end, what would be the good of it all? He would have fulfilled his vow; but somehow it seemed mean, paltry, unworthy. Besides, his scheme was of a devilish nature. It was savagery, coated with the veneer of civilisation. Murder would be far more merciful.

"That woman knows a secret to which I am a stranger," he said as he looked down on the lonely farmhouse. "Of course I could explain away all she

said, and I could laugh at her childish superstition, but she possesses something which is hidden from me. And she was right, too. What is a man the better for revenge? When one has had his eye for an eye, when he has given measure for measure of scorn and disgrace, who's the better? Suppose I have my way and—do what I said, what then? Suppose, when I have worked my will, I go away, leaving only desolation and disgrace behind, should I be any happier? No, I should still be in hell!"

He strode along like a man in anger.

"I felt that I was Radford Leicester again when she kissed me last night," he went on. "I was at The Beeches again, and for a minute I was in heaven—yes, in heaven. I was the lover once more, and, great heaven, how sweet it was to love!"

A new light came into his eyes, and he looked more like the Leicester of old, Leicester at his best. For a moment dark passions were dispelled by something higher, purer; the sunshine of joy rested upon him, but only for a moment.

"No," he cried, "that's all gone. I'll see the thing through to the end. Besides, it is not I whom she loves. It is a rich foreigner, a partner in the Great Tripoli Company, a Signor Ricordo, a man with an Italian father and a Moorish mother. Radford Leicester is nothing to her; she said so. She declared she could never marry him; ay, and in spite of her promise to him, she is willing to marry Ricordo. A woman's promise! Byron was right, in spite of all canting moralists. A woman's fidelity is like thistledown, and her promises are written in the sands.

"I wonder why that woman is so happy?" he went

on presently. "A lonely widow, she has lost her husband, and her son was killed in the war, and yet she is happy. Her faith is strong, she has no fear. Of course she's simple, and she's ignorant; but if she's happy—great God, what does all our learning amount to? What is the value of all this culture of which we boast? She might have known all about me in telling that story of Aaron Goudge, for, after all, the motives of that sullen blackguard were quite as high as mine. Liddicoat wronged him and he tried to murder him. Olive Castlemaine wronged me, and I have brooded over something which is really worse than murder. He had his way, and then lived in torments; and supposing I have my way, what shall I be the better? Oh, what a bitter mockery life is!"

He strode along the valley which he had entered, and then, climbing the hill before him, came upon a long stretch of waste land.

"She told me she loved me," he went on; "told me that, in spite of struggle, her heart went out to me; told me, that while she feared me, she was never happy unless I was near; ay, and she told me, that although her promise never to marry seemed binding when she thought of others, it seemed to become less and less real when she thought of me. Well, why can't I be happy? Why can't I keep up my character, and live in happiness with her? She loves me, and I—no, I don't—I hate her still—yes, I hate her more than ever!"

But evidently he was not satisfied. The simple farmwoman had started him off on a new train of thought.

"Nothing is ever worth doing wrong for; it never

was, and it never will be.' Who said that? It's true after all. We may sneer at right and wrong, we may say that right and wrong alter with different people in different countries, but they remain; yes, and right is heaven, and wrong is hell. And I know enough of life to have learnt that hate means black night. The joy of it is devil's joy, only to turn to bitterness and gall. What is revenge, after all, but going to hell of yourself in order to drag some one else there? And that's what I've been thinking of. But if I don't, what then? Let me think of that now; but no, I won't. I'm not one who vows to do a thing, and then throws it over lightly."

The sun began to lower, and the air grew cooler. The sweet, fresh air of the moors fanned his brow, and it seemed to bring healthier thoughts to him.

"Winfield refused to stay with me as my guest when he knew what was in my heart," he said, "and Winfield does not profess to be a saint; he's only just a clean-minded, honest fellow. Was he right, I wonder? Why, after all, can't I be happy? Let me think now; yes, I will think it out. Suppose I give up my scheme of revenge; suppose I go away and leave my plans unrealised. Not that I am going to do it, but suppose, for the sake of argument, that I did, what then? I should never see her again, and she would think of me as an Eastern adventurer who proposed to her, and then was obliged to leave the neighbourhood because he feared the law or something of that sort. Never see her again!"

He stopped in his walk as though some unseen force barred the way.

"Never see her again!" he repeated time after

time. The thought seemed to stagger him as it became more and more real to him.

"I hate her!" he cried. "Did she not drive me away from her, and in driving me away sent me to regions which——"

He started on his walk again.

"I loved her last night for a minute; yes, I loved her then. I forgot everything, and I was in paradise. I loved her; yes, and O God, I believe I love her now!"

For an hour he walked along with stern, set face. Away in the far distance he could see the tor which rose up behind the ninth hole, at the golf links. With that as a landmark, he could not lose his way. Not that he would have cared if he had. A great passion burned within him, to which even he had been a stranger.

"Could I—could I—after all, do what I have made up my mind to do? Could I, out of pure devilry and desire for revenge, drag her name into the mud of disgrace? Could I make her the byword for gossiping women? Could I leave her a wrecked, ruined woman just because I—— Besides, what should I feel? Hell! No hell which I have ever entered would be as deep as that. Talk about a bottomless pit full of fire and brimstone—it would be nothing to what I should feel."

Again he thought of the woman at the farmhouse, while the story of Aaron Goudge came back to him; and as he thought, a new feeling rose within him as though he heard something saying, "Be a man; do the thing that is right."

"What is right?" he asked. "Suppose I were to

go to her now and tell her everything—everything. What would she do? She would drive me away although I were a leper. She told me that she did not love Radford Leicester, and that she would never marry him, even if he came back repentant and worthy. How much less would she love him, then, if I were to tell her the whole truth? If I was unworthy of her six years ago, how much less am I worthy of her now. Let me think, now. There are three things I could do. First, I could go away and send to her telling her that Signor Ricordo was an adventurer and had to fly for fear of his life. Then all would be as though I had never come. No, it would not. Then I hated her; but now, yes, I believe I hate her still! But I should give up my scheme of vengeance, and let her remain to live her own life. That is the first. Then, second, I could carry out my scheme. I could go on as I had marked it out. I could leave her, wounded and disgraced, as I should know she would feel herself wounded and disgraced. And oh, the thought of revenge is sweet! Then, third, I could go to her, cap in hand, and tell her the whole story—that Leicester was dead, but that he has risen again. But in either case I should have to leave her; I should go away, and never see her again. And could I bear that? No. And that reminds me, there is another way. I, Signor Ricordo, could marry her. I could live here. I could play the squire; I could be happy. But could I? To know all the time that I was a living lie! Besides, the truth would be bound to come out. No, there would be no rest nor peace that way."

Everything, he scarcely knew why, was changed. The thing he had longed for was within his reach,

and yet he did not want to stretch out his hand and grasp it. The kiss which still burned on his lips somehow roused within him new feelings. The story of the countrywoman changed the course of his thoughts. He still longed for revenge, but the sweetness of it was gone.

There was a change in the look of the sky. Right in front of him, and behind the tor, a great blue-black cloud was rising rapidly. In a few minutes it seemed to cover the whole of the southern horizon. The wind blew colder, the air seemed charged with sulphur. Not that he minded. Indeed, he scarcely noticed the change of the atmosphere. Presently the sun seemed to change colour. First it shone through a great purple haze, and then it was blotted out.

He found himself shivering. Across the wild wastes of the moors he heard a moan, like the moan of some despairing monster. He knew it was only the wind, but to him there was a kind of personality behind it. The great spirit of the moors was breathing across the broad expanse, just as he had heard the spirit of the desert breathe across the great wastes of sand.

A few minutes later he heard the distant rumbling of thunder, and although it was yet day, it became almost as dark as a winter evening. The thunder came nearer, and then he saw a flash of lightning. He still trudged on. The weather did not matter. The storm in his heart drove away all thoughts of the storm that was coming upon him.

Again the thunder rolled. This time it was nearer, while the flashes of lightning were more vivid. The rain began to fall too, not rapidly, but large, heavy drops splashed against his face.

"No, I can't give up the scheme of years," he cried. "I won't be the plaything of a passing fancy. She might have made a man of me; but instead she sent me into outer darkness. I might have been a good man if—if she had—but should I? Was my reformation anything but a passing mood? Might I not, if I had married her, dragged her down into the mire even as I have planned to do since? After all, I was but a straw in the wind. The moment she gave me up I flew to the drink and to the devil. What right had I, after all, to expect anything else?"

In spite of himself, he gave a start. It seemed as though right above his head the heavens were torn in twain, while the whole sky was lit up with blue vivid flashes of light. The rain fell in torrents.

"How relentless Nature is, after all!" he thought. "What can man do in face of such forces as those? Is God behind it all, I wonder? If so, what is the use of our working against Him? Let the breath of the Almighty touch a man, and he shrivels like the leaves in autumn. Unless he works in unison with Nature, Nature crushes him. Have I been trying to do battle against God all these years, I wonder?"

The rain continued to fall, but he still trudged on. He had a sort of savage delight in feeling the rain beat against him, in seeing the lightning's flash and hearing the thunder's roar.

"I was a blind fool," he cried. "I believed that I hated her, I believed I should hate her for ever. Yet, at the first touch of her lips on mine, I find myself as weak as a child, and still I can't give up my dreams of revenge. What playthings we are, after all!"

A moment later he was blinded, first by a flash of

lightning, which he thought had struck him, and then by the rain, which came upon him in a deluge.

"I can't battle against this," he said; "it's impossible, yet there's no shelter anywhere." Through the blinding storm he saw a huge rock. At least that would shelter him somewhat, and with difficulty he made his way towards it. From there he could watch the tornado of the elements.

"Is there a God behind it all, I wonder?" he thought as thunder-clap followed thunder-clap, and the whole heavens were lit up with streaks of light. "If there is, does He care? Yes, there is a God, there must be. I wonder if that woman was right? Did Jesus Christ come to tell us what God was like? Is there any meaning in that story? She believes it, and she says that that man Aaron Goudge found peace in it. I wonder, now; I wonder."

"God help me!" he cried presently. It was an involuntary prayer. It had passed his lips even before he knew, and yet, although he knew it not, it was the natural expression of a soul in torment.

He laughed aloud. "I've been praying," he said. "Well, why not? I wonder now if God cares? Would He hear me if I spoke to Him?"

The thought struck him as curious. He had scarcely ever prayed in his life, but somehow there was a meaning in it now. Some words came back to his mind, like the memory of some forgotten dream. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Heavenly Father. Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened unto you."

Who said that? Yes, it was Jesus, the Man of

Galilee, who claimed to be the Son of God. Was God His Father? Well, and why should he not pray?

Perhaps it was because of the experience through which he had been passing, perhaps it was because of the storm which swept in mad fury across the moors, or perhaps it was because of a deeper reason which no man can put into words, but Leicester knelt down on the heather and prayed while the lightnings flashed and the thunder rolled.

He uttered no wild, incoherent cries, he scarcely spoke a word; but he prayed, and as he prayed the whole of his life seemed to sweep before him. Things forgotten, thoughts that were strange, visions seen only from afar came to him. There was something awesome, majestic about it all—the storm-tossed man pouring out his soul to his Maker, amidst the storm-rent heavens.

"Great God, tell me what to do, and I'll do it," he said at length. No voice came out of the skies, no message came to him from out of the angry winds. The storm still swept on in wild fury. How long he knelt he knew not, it might have been hours, but he knew that he had entered deep in the heart of things. A man who really prays enters into an experience to which the prayerless man is a stranger. What thoughts passed through his mind I cannot tell; perhaps he could not have told himself—he only knew that the foundations of his life had been broken up. He realised what he had been, he knew what he was. He saw life as he had never seen it before—saw how poor and vain were the thoughts of man, how great were the thoughts of God. The great deeps seemed to be revealed to him, and he knew that no man lives unless he links

himself to the Eternal Heart, the Heart made real by the Son of God, who lived and died. The reasonings of man seemed but the crying of children; the logic of the schoolmen no more than children's castles on the sands. There were great deeps beyond all their theories, deeps never to be understood by the mind, but felt by the soul. God had spoken.

When he rose to his feet, he also knew that he had risen from the dead. There was a new life in his heart, and he was conscious of it. The Radford Leicester of hours before, and the Radford Leicester of now, were different. He had passed from death unto life.

For a time he walked on, almost unheeding whither he went, but presently, as the sky became clearer, he saw the dim outline of the tor which had been his landmark. As he saw it, he realised that he was not more than an hour's walk from Vale Linden. In two hours or so he would see Olive again, and he would tell her what was right for him to tell. For he knew what he had to do now. The only course was the right course, and he must walk in it. He knew what it meant, too. When he told Olive who he was, and related the story of the past six years, she would bid him go away, as she had bidden him long ago; but he must tell her all. He owed it to her, and he would pay his debt. The future was not in his hands, but in God's, and he would fight against his Maker no longer.

"Good gracious, sur, you've been out in all this weather."

"In every bit of it, Mrs. Briggs."

"And there's not a dry thread on 'ee."

"Not one." And he laughed as he spoke.

"I've bin wonderin' 'bout 'ee for 'ours. It's bin a ter'ble storm."

"It's been very wonderful. Have you any hot water, Mrs. Briggs?"

"Plenty, sir."

"I'll have a bath, and dress for dinner. The simpler the meal the better, Mrs. Briggs."

"Certainly, sur. I'm thankful you are saafe. I was afraid you was struck by the lightning, sur. Were you afraid of it all, sur?"

"Yes, I think I was."

"Well, thank God, you are safe, sur."

"Yes, I thank God too, Mrs. Briggs."

The woman looked at him curiously; there was a new tone in his voice, a new light in his eyes. He no longer seemed a "strange Eastern gentleman" to her.

He ate his dinner in silence. He had but little appetite, but he went through the form of eating for fear Mrs. Briggs should think he was not pleased with her cooking.

Presently he rose to go out. "Goin' out again, sur? I should have thought you'd been tired after bein' out in all that storm. I should think you don't get any wilder storms in the parts you've come from."

"Different, Mrs. Briggs, entirely different."

"I suppose it's very grand, in they furrin parts," said Mrs. Briggs, "but I don't want to leave Vale Linden."

"Nor I, Mrs. Briggs; but I shall have to."

"Not yet, sur, I hope."

"Yes, very soon, I expect."

"I am sorry. I was hopin' you'd stay a long time, I was, for sure. The house won't seem like the same without 'ee. You do git n ore English too, sur, makin' so bold."

"Thank you, Mrs. Briggs; you've been very good to me."

"You won't be laivin' before the end of the summer, will 'ee, sur?"

"Very likely I shall leave to-morrow."

"Nothin' wrong happened, I 'ope, sur?"

"A great deal has happened, but nothing wrong. Mrs. Briggs, do you believe a man can rise from the dead?"

"Not in these days, sur. Of course they did in the time of our Lord. There was Lazarus, and the young man in the village of Nain. Of course the Lord can do whatever He will."

"Yes," said Leicester quietly, "I believe He can."

He went out into the night. The storm had gone now, and the sky was cloudless. After the wild tempest, a peace had come. The air was fresh, and pure, and sweet. Nature was a parable of his own life. After the black death of winter came the resurrection of spring, after the wild storm had come a peace. Life was new to him. He felt it in every fibre of his being; old things had passed away, but he felt a great sorrow in his heart. For he knew what lay before him. From that night Signor Ricordo would be no more, and he, Radford Leicester, must go out into the wilderness again.

He hesitated for a moment, and then went indoors again to his own room. In a few minutes he came out again, and started for Vale Linden Hall.

"It is the will of God," he said, as he went, "it is the price I must pay. Well, I will pay it to the uttermost farthing. Then I will go away, and live my new life."

He was not long in reaching the house, and he was admitted without a word.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE MAN WHO ROSE AGAIN

THE servant opened the door of the drawing-room, which, although the sun had set, was far from dark. The time was summer, and the air was so clear that darkness seemed impossible.

"I will light a lamp, and then I will tell Miss Castlemaine that you are here," she said.

"No, no," said Leicester, almost eagerly; "do not trouble about a lamp. It would be a pity to spoil the light of the moon. Besides, it is almost as light as day. Tell Miss Castlemaine that I am waiting here, will you?"

The servant went away without a word; she did not pay much attention to the gentleman's behaviour. What could be expected of these strange men from the East? They could not be expected to act like civilised Englishmen.

"Signor Ricordo is in the drawing-room, miss," she said to Olive. "I wanted to light the lamps, but he asked me not to. He said the moonlight was so very beautiful."

Olive laughed almost nervously. She had been in a state of suspense all the day. She had expected him soon after breakfast, and she wondered, with many

fears in her heart, why he had not come. If she had known all that had been in Leicester's mind that day, she would have feared still more. More than once she had felt angry. To say the least, it was strange that after she had promised to be his wife in the evening, he should fail to come to her in the morning, and she realised more than ever that strange dread of her promised husband. Besides, the thought of Leicester had come back to her again. She remembered how, after they were engaged, he spent every moment he could tear himself away from his affairs at her side. This man, on the other hand, had spent the whole day away from her, while only a narrow valley lay between them. All sorts of strange questions haunted her, and especially was she anxious when her father asked her why he had not come according to his promise. Every hour of the day she had expected him, and when, after the storm had passed, John Castlemaine drove away to dine at a neighbouring house, a feeling of utter loneliness fell upon her.

But he had come now, and she hurried towards him. When she entered the room, she saw him only dimly. He was standing in a part of the room where dark shadows fell. She went towards him timidly, her heart beating wildly. She no longer thought of Leicester now; this man filled the whole horizon of her life. When she was within a few feet of him, she stopped. Her heart became as heavy as lead. Why did he not come to meet her? Why did he stand there in the shadow, without moving a step towards her, after he had been away all the day?

"You are come at last," she said.

"Yes. Will you come and sit by me?"

Almost fearfully she did as she was bidden. The sofa on which they sat was so much in the darkness that she could not see his face plainly; only the dim outline of his form was visible. He acted in a most unlover-like fashion. He did not even offer to take her hand. She almost feared to sit by his side.

"Aren't you—you very late?" she stammered. "Is anything the matter?" She hardly knew what she was saying, and the silence had become oppressive.

"Yes," he replied, "something is the matter."

"You—you are not ill, are you?"

"I don't know—oh, no, certainly not—not in the way you think."

"Why did you not come earlier—this morning, as you promised?" she asked. It was not a bit what she meant to say, but she had lost control over herself.

"I've been very busy—that is, I've been finding out something."

"What?"

"I've been making inquiries about—Leicester."

"About whom?"

"About Leicester. I've discovered something."

Her heart ceased to beat. What did he mean by speaking to her like this? What could he have discovered about Leicester? Besides, his voice was strange. She no longer heard the low, fluid tones of an Oriental, but the voice of the past.

"What?" she asked.

"I've discovered that Leicester is not dead"

"What!"

"I've discovered that Leicester is not dead. That is why I've been away all the day. It has put everything that is—in a new light."

She sat as moveless as a statue. His voice sounded far away. It was very strange too, and yet it was very familiar.

"Not dead?"

"No. There can be no doubt about it. He died, but he has risen again."

A strange feeling possessed her heart. She was not sure whether it was an overmastering joy, or a terrible fear. Perhaps it was both. But the news was also a great shock, and the room seemed to swim around her.

"But, but," she stammered presently, "how do you explain—the—the, that is——"

"How do I explain the coroner's inquest, and all that was associated with it? I will tell you. It is darker than I thought. Will you light the lamp?"

Like one in a dream she did as she was bidden. Her hand trembled so that she could scarcely hold the match to the wick of the lamp; but she succeeded at length, and the mellow light filled the room.

"There," she said, and she tried to laugh, "I have managed to do it. But tell me you are jesting with me."

"No, I am not jesting. Look at me."

She turned to him as he spoke, but she was powerless to speak a word.

"Did I not speak the truth? Has not Leicester come to life again?"

She looked at him like one spell-bound. There, standing before her, was Leicester. The huge black beard and moustache were shaven off; he no longer wore the fez which had helped to give him an Eastern appearance. His face was paler. He was stouter

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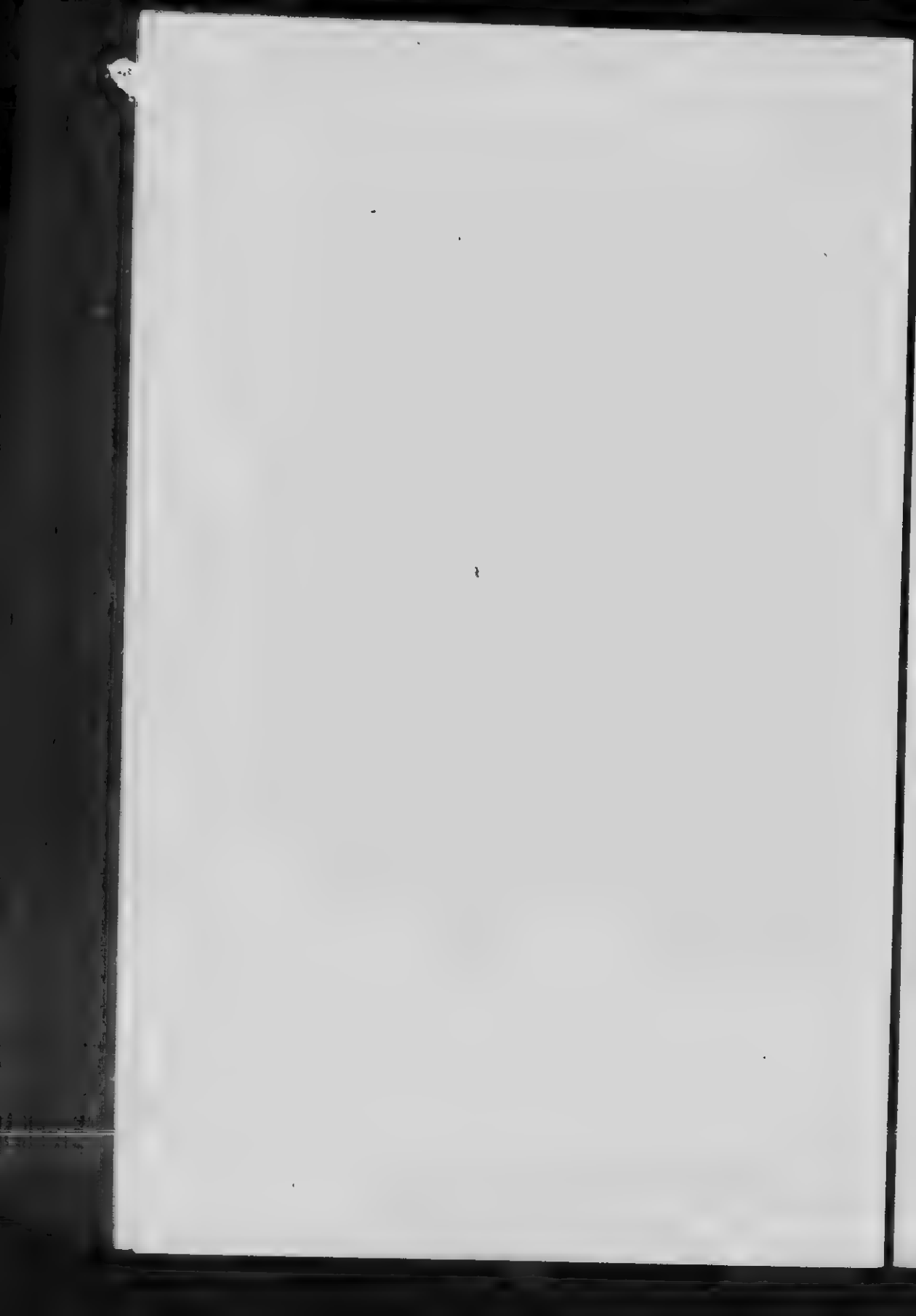
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She gazed at him dumbfounded.



than the Leicester of old, and there was still a suggestion of strangeness about him ; but the black beard and moustache, the fez, and the Eastern appearance were gone. She could not doubt her eyes.

She thought that for the first time in her life she was going to faint. Her blood ran through her veins like streams of ice ; her head swam. Presently she mastered herself, however.

"I swore that I would come back again, and I have come ; but do not fear, Olive."

Still she stood looking at him with wide-open eyes. She could realise nothing yet. Where was Ricordo, the man she had promised to marry ? And why was Leicester there ? How had she been deceived ? What was the meaning of it all ?

"Before you drive me away again, I have something to tell you," he went on, "something which you must hear. It is a strange story, but you must hear it."

"But tell me," she said ; "I cannot understand. You are——"

"I am Radford Leicester. There is no Signor Ricordo, there never was any Signor Ricordo—except in name."

He spoke quite calmly, yet his voice trembled somewhat. Again she looked, and the truth became clearer to her ; nevertheless she could not quite understand what had happened.

"Will you not sit down ?" he said. "Do not fear ; I quite understand your feelings. I will not sit near you. But before I go away I want to tell you something. I want to remove all haunting fear from your mind. Naturally you loathe my presence—as you said long ago ; naturally you feel defiled at the thought

of my being near you. I quite realise that ; you told me so, on our wedding-day, at The Beeches. Still, you will be glad to know what I have to tell you. After that I will go away into the darkness, never to trouble you by my presence again."

"But tell me," she said almost piteously, "I—I am afraid I am ill, and don't understand. But you are Radford—that is, Radford Leicester ; and, as for the other——"

"There is no other, there never was any other. He was simply my great lie, the lie by which I wished to work my will. Radford Leicester never died, really died—he only pretended. He practised a fraud, a cruel, unworthy fraud ; but he never died. He died to the world, that is all. I have been the Eastern stranger all the time—an Eastern stranger with a strange appearance. I have been that to deceive you. I am going to tell you why ; then everything will be plain, and then I will go away again."

He took a few steps across the room, and as he did so she saw the Leicester she had known of olden time, and yet a new Leicester, with a new light in his eyes, and with a ring in his voice she had never heard before. Somehow, she did not know why, but in the dazed state of her mind *Ricordo* had faded away. As Leicester had said, there was no *Signor Ricordo*—there never had been such a person.

"I must needs speak of things that are painful to you," he said ; "and yet perhaps they will not be. They are painful to me. You remember the day which should have been our wedding-day ? You know that I came to you with Winfield. The man Sprague had sent you a letter about me. Well, the letter was true,

and yet it was black lies. I tried to explain everything to you, but you would not listen. You know whether you were right in refusing."

He related the story of the wager. He did not spare himself; he only told the bare, unvarnished truth. It was not a pleasant story to tell; but he told it truly, while Olive sat and listened without sign or motion.

"Yes, I did love you," he went on, "but I was not worthy of you. My seeming reformation was only a mockery. I thought it was real at the time, but it was not. If you had married me, I should have fallen again, and perhaps I should have cursed you. I know it now and you will see presently why what I say is true. But I was mad with anger, and I gave way to my old vice. You had helped me to conquer it for a time, but all the time I was at heart a bad man, all the time I was a drunkard. If you had saved me really, I should not have given way again; I should not have flown to it though you cast me off. Yes, I loved you, all I was capable of loving; but it was a love of self in the main.

"You know what took place at Tavistock—the drunkenness, the degradation, the disgrace. I was hooted out of the town, and I laid the blame to your doors. I went away on the moors and tried to think of what I should do, vowing vengeance on you all the time, yet never seeing how my vengeance was to be wreaked. I returned to London, and stayed there some time in hiding. No one knew where I was, save an old lawyer who had managed my money affairs. One night I saw at Blackfriars Bridge the body of a dead man. It had been washed on the steps, and left stranded there. It was beyond recognition; evidently

it had been in the water some time. I put a letter of mine in the pocket of the dead man's clothes, and then waited. Everything turned out as I expected. No one had any doubts. I had committed suicide, and this was my body. I will not dwell any longer on that; there is no need. I went away to the East. I did so of a set purpose. I went away so that the world might forget me, and on the whole it did forget me. But I did not forget. One purpose filled my mind and heart; I will tell you what it was presently. I was a bad man when I first saw you; bad with the veneer of respectability and pride. Afterwards I became bad without that veneer. Think your worst about me, you will not think too badly, save in one thing—I would conquer my craving for drink. Nothing was possible if I did not do that. And I have done that. Never since I left England, more than six years ago, has alcohol ever passed my lips. I need not describe the hell in which I lived, save to say that all the time I brooded over my dream of vengeance on you. I determined that, as far as you and—Sprague were concerned, there should be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. I told you years ago, that my faith in God was but little. During those years I lived in the East, I learned to believe in a God; but it was a God of terror, a God that seemed to consent to my dream of revenge.

"Sometimes I have thought I was mad. Perhaps I was, but it was a madness which no one suspected, and it was a madness with a purpose. After I had been away two years, I was able to render a service to the head of the Great Tripoli Company. I need not describe how; but by a piece of good fortune I saved,

not only his life, but his honour. He also said that I saved the fortunes of the great company. Be that as it may, those who were his enemies never dreamed that I should be able to help him. I was only an ignorant muleteer, who did not know their language, and who could not fathom their designs. But I did both, and I saved this great man. It seems like some far-fetched melodrama, doesn't it? But the thing is true. It leaked out little by little, I suppose, that I was a man of some education and ability, and by-and-by I became bound up in the fortunes of this great trading concern.

"It all fell in with my plans. I had learnt to hate you more and more, and I determined that nothing should baulk me in my purpose. Only once did I fear that I should fail in that which I had sworn to do. I was stricken with a plague common to that part of the world, and I was given up for dead. Even in my prosperity my great desire to live was that I might express my hatred for you. But I got better, and I felt as though the God in whom I had learnt to believe would deliver you into my hands; for there was one thing that illness did for me, it altered my appearance very materially—so much so that when I came back here no one suspected who I was.

"I shall soon come to the end now. As soon as I was able I came to England, determined that I would work your ruin, your disgrace. Nay, do not fear; I am only telling you this that you may know what is your right to know. I did not know what had happened to you; but I determined that, wherever you were, I would find you, and whatever your circumstances were, I would accomplish my purposes.

"I found you here—still unmarried, but apparently

happy. I also found that you were much admired, and that you were contemplating marriage with that young squire. I made my plans. I will tell you what they were. I would win your love ; I felt sure I could do it ; even if I could not win that, I believed in the devil sufficiently to be sure that I could gain your consent to marry me. I remembered, too, that I had won you in the old days, and I hoped that I possessed something of the power by which I won you then. Even if I failed, my purpose to have my revenge should not be frustrated, for I hated you with all the intensity of my being."

All the time Olive sat with wide, staring eyes and blanched face. Sometimes she felt as though the recital were only a ghastly nightmare, but when she looked into the man's face she felt its reality. The man was Leicester, the man whom she believed had died six years before ; but even yet she could not understand everything. What was this scheme of vengeance which he was going to work upon her ? It would be difficult to analyse her feelings just then. The past and the present, the known and the unknown, were so interwoven that nothing seemed real.

" You wonder how a man can hate so ? " he went on. " So do I now ; but after all, man is only an incipient devil when he gives way to his passions, and I was only a reversion to type. This was the thought I had nursed ; through you I had been scorned, disgraced, through you I had been cast into hell. I did not realise all that went before ; I only remembered those things which fed my hatred. And this is what I determined to do."

He hesitated a second, as though he feared to go on.

"It seems mean, it seems devilish," he said presently, "and it is what it seems. I vowed that I would marry you with all the display of a great wedding, and then when it was all over, when we were known to the world as man and wife, I would tell you who I was, and I would tell you that you were no wife at all, because I had married another woman elsewhere. This also I would tell the world and leave you, disgraced, ruined, the topic for scandal, the woman who had become the dupe, the plaything of an adventurer, who was the husband of another wife, the father of children in another part of the world."

Again he walked across the room and returned.

"Oh, I know it seems paltry, and it is paltry, the scheme of a harlequin; all the same, I knew that it would make you feel what I had felt. I knew your proud nature, and that you would never be able to hold up your head again. I was sure that this would wound you a thousand times more than poverty, or any other calamity which men fear. As for Sprague, I had prepared for his fall. He should be ruined, disgraced, a penniless vagrant.

"You despise me. Yes, yes, I know; but it was my plan of revenge, and knowing you as I do, it was the most fiendish thing I could conceive of. Not that I have a wife; no, great God, after knowing you, I could never marry another, but this was my plan. I determined, too, that a history of the man you had married, this Leicester whom you had scorned, should be published in all the newspapers—a history which told of him as one who for six years had lived in the foulest corruption. I fancied your being discussed in every club-room in London, in every ale-house in England, that

you, the proud Olive Castlemaine, who had driven away Radford Leicester because of your pride, had afterwards married him—him who was the husband of another woman, and the most corrupt blackguard who ever walked God's earth.

"Yes, yes, it was mean enough, paltry enough, but it was cruel too, and I gloated over my plan, for the devil possessed me. I had risen again from the dead to wreak my vengeance.

"Well, you remember last night? You promised to be my wife. I held you in my arms, I kissed you, you kissed me. For a moment I ceased to hate; I loved again, and the love was heaven. But when I left you, I vowed that I would not turn aside from the path I had marked out. This morning I could not come to you, I wanted to go away on the hills alone, I wanted to visit the scenes in which I had made my vows years ago.

"I went into a farmhouse where a simple and pure farmer's dame talked to me in the old days. To-day she talked to me again, and she made me feel that I was a fool. She made me realise that if I dragged you into hell, I should go into a deeper hell myself. She made me realise that there was a God in the world other than I knew of. Still I determined to go on as I had begun."

He stopped again, as if not knowing how to proceed with his story; then he told her of his walk across the moors, and of that wondrous experience which was too deep for words, of how God had come to him and had given him a new heart.

"Ever since last night I have known that I love you," he said; "ay, I knew that I loved you with a

love too deep for words, but I would not confess it to myself until to-day. But I knew, too, that it was too late, because if I were unworthy of you years ago, I am a thousand times less worthy now. Then God told me to tell you what I have told you."

Leicester rose to his feet.

"Now I have told you—what I came to tell you," he said. "It was right that you should know, and I have told you. That is all, I think ; so I will go. I do not ask you to forgive me—I do not, cannot expect that. Good-night."

He hesitated a second as though he expected her to speak, but not a word escaped her lips. He thought the look in her eyes hard and repellent. As he moved towards the door he took a last look at her, but she made no sign, nor spoke a word.

"Good-night, good-bye," he said, and was gone.

She heard him go into the hall, and open the front door ; afterwards the sound of his footsteps on the drive reached her ; but she did not move. The man's revelations had stunned her ; she felt incapable of acting or thinking. All she knew was that a feeling of utter desolation possessed her.

She was glad her father was out of the house, for she had a great dread of meeting any one just then. In a vague way she had a longing to understand the meaning of what she had heard. For more than an hour she sat in utter silence. Little by little the reality of Leicester's story came to her. Leicester was not dead. He had come back to wreak his revenge on her.

At first she was angry. That he whom she had driven away should come back as a stranger in order to drag her into disgrace, hurt her pride.

But the anger did not long remain. She reflected that he had renounced his plan of revenge. Nay, more, he had come to her almost humbly, and told her that he had learnt to be ashamed of his unworthy designs.

Without knowing it she began to analyse her feelings. What was to become of her? Ricordo was gone—there never had been a Ricordo, except in name. And yet she had loved him. The night before, when she had promised to be his wife, and felt his lips upon hers, she knew that her life had gone out to his. Even although she could not understand it, she knew it was so. In spite of the fear which had possessed her, her heart had responded to his pleadings. Even then the thought of it was strange. If, years before, any one had told her that she would have given her heart to a man with Ricordo's professed antecedents, she would have laughed at such a suggestion as impossible. And yet, in spite of herself, she had loved him, she did love him. And yet there was no Ricordo; there never had been.

Then, like a flash, the whole truth came to her. It was Leicester she had loved all the time. She realised now why, even at their first meeting, he had such an influence over her. It was not a stranger with an Italian name, it was Leicester, the man who had won her years before, and whom she had sent away in anger, but whom she had never been able to forget. Her heart had thrilled its recognition of the man, even although she thought him to be a stranger. It was Leicester all the time. Everything was plain to her now; there never had been any Signor Ricordo; at most he was only a name, a fancy. That was why, the night before, it had seemed to her that it was Leicester who had kissed her. It

THE MAN WHO ROSE AGAIN 42

was not a new love at all. It was but the resurrection of an old love, the one love of her life.

For a moment she forgot everything in this one great thought. Leicester was still alive, that she still loved him, and that she had never loved any one else. She had only cared about the stranger because her heart knew it was he.

Then she realised that he had gone, and with that realisation a great blackness fell upon her life. In spite of all he had told her, she loved him still. She might be angry at the revenge of which he had told her, her anger was lost in her longing for him. Nevertheless he had gone, and left her desolate.

Where was he now? she wondered. He had meant what he said when he had told her that he was leaving her for ever. He believed that she scorned him now as she had scorned him years before, and he would not wait to be driven away, as he had been driven then. He had gone away, and she would never see him again. If he only knew!—oh, if he only knew!

The room was oppressive; she could scarcely breathe. She went to the casement window and opened it wide. The sweet pure air of the summer night was wafted to her, and there, lying beneath the moon's rays, was one of the loveliest sights in England. But she thought not of it; her heart was torn at the thought that she had bidden goodbye to the only man she had ever loved or could love.

Slowly she dragged her feet to her own bedroom, and tried to face the thought of the future. She had lived the past six years without him, and she must face the prospect of living her whole life without him. He did not know of her love, and he never would,

except she told him, and that she could never do, for she knew he would never come to her again.

For a long time she sat alone, and faced what seemed to her inevitable darkness, then suddenly she started to her feet. It was her pride which caused her to drive him away six years before, and it was still pride that kept her from letting him know the truth now. She was allowing a poor and unworthy vanity to stand between her and happiness.

A few minutes later she was on her way to the Manor Farm. There had been a battle between love and pride, and love had won. She believed that not only her happiness, but his was at stake. She almost flew across the park, so eager was she to reach him. Pride was gone, the fear of what the world might think, if the world knew, was gone. She only knew that she loved, and that she would, if needs be, plead for forgiveness.

Crossing the bridge which spanned the river, she made her way up the footpath, until she reached the garden gate. A minute later she was on the lawn outside his window. For a moment her heart seemed to stop beating. What if he should drive her away, as she had driven him? Could she go to him, and offer him a love that might be repulsed? Standing there on the lawn, she could see him plainly. Evidently he was preparing to leave. In the middle of the room was a large box, in which he was placing his belongings. Like one fascinated she watched. Now and then he would stop in his work and stand still seemingly staring into vacancy, and then, as if spurred on by some secret thought, would eagerly continue his work.

The room in which she saw him was the Manor House parlour, a low ceiled apartment, with large casement windows opening out on the lawn. The light from the window fell upon the spot where she was standing, but he did not see her. She, however, could see his face plainly. She wondered how she had failed to recognise him, even although he had been disguised by his thick beard, for as she watched him she saw the Leicester she had known years before. But his face seemed terribly hard and stern, and she did not understand the look in his eyes. How dare she go to him, and tell him what was in her heart? Would he not scorn her, as she had scorned him? Thus minute after minute she waited, afraid to do what she had set out to do. So hard and unforgiving did his expression seem to her that she was almost on the point of turning away, when she saw him sit down like a man overcome, and pillow his face in his hands. Then she hesitated no longer. Approaching the window, she knocked gently, and instantly he lifted his head with a look of eager inquiry.

With trembling hands she opened the window and entered.

"Olive—Miss Castlemaine!" he said, like one dazed.

She went straight to him.

"Radford," she said, "I have come to ask you something, to tell you something."

He did not speak, but looked at her with eager, inquiring eyes.

"I have come to ask you to forgive me," she said, "and to tell you that—that it was you I loved—all the time. There never was any stranger, Radford. I loved him because my heart knew it was you."

For a moment he could not understand, but when her meaning came to him his eyes burned with a new light, his heart sang for joy, he knew what heaven meant.

"Forgive me, Radford, will you?" she went on. "I do not deserve it from you, I know. I put my pride before my love, and I drove you away from me. But, Radford, forgive me, will you? All my foolish pride is gone now. I love you, Radford—and—will you take me back to your heart?"

Then Radford Leicester knew that God had forgiven him, and from that day life would in very deed have a new meaning.

"Will you—Radford?" she said, pleadingly.

For answer he put out his arms, and a moment later he held her to his heart.

What they said to each other, or the explanations that were made, it is not for me to place on record, but I know a little later, when Radford Leicester and his promised wife went back to her home, the sky of their lives was as cloudless as the great dome of blue above them, for each knew that God had willed their happiness.

THE END

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